

THE SO-CALLED *RISĀLAT AL-ḤURŪF* (EPISTLE ON LETTERS)  
ASCRIED TO SAHL AL-TUSTARĪ AND LETTER MYSTICISM  
IN AL-ANDALUS\*

BY

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The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the ascription to Sahl al-Tustarī of an unnamed treatise on letters found in a unicum manuscript in the Chester Beatty collection no. 3168, ff. 166-174.<sup>1</sup> This treatise was found and first published by Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrāhīm Jaʿfar in 1974.<sup>2</sup> It was Jaʿfar who first attributed this unnamed epistle to Sahl al-Tustarī and who coined the title *Risālat al-ḥurūf* (*Epistle on Letters*) which does not, in fact, appear in the manuscript. This attribution and title were later accepted by other scholars, among them Pillar Garrido Clemente, who, in 2006, published a Spanish translation of this treatise, followed by a new critical edition, which she published in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Our paper follows a comparative approach: we shall compare the teachings of Sahl al-Tustarī as reflected in classical Ṣūfī sources with sayings ascribed to him in this epistle as well as in other sources dealing with letters, in particular the tenth-century *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* (*Book on the Properties of Letters*) by the Andalusian author Ibn Masarra.

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<sup>1</sup> The manuscript seems to lack folio numbers and the pagination appears to be a later addition; on this, see Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, p. 70; cf. Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> See Jaʿfar, *Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, pp. 366-375.

<sup>3</sup> Garrido, “El Tratado de las letras”, pp. 92-100; eadem, “Estudio y edición”, pp. 75-79; for a philological analysis of the manuscript, its form and dating, see Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, pp. 69-71; also Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 17-18.

In our Introduction we shall also offer a two-part description of Sahl al-Tustarī: Sahl as reflected in classical Ṣūfī literature and in modern scholarly studies; and Sahl as reflected in our unnamed epistle and in Andalusian sources. This two-part description corresponds to what we perceive of as “the traditional Sahl” versus “the Andalusian Sahl”. Basing ourselves on historical and prosopographic data, we shall then try to offer an explanation of the prevalence and development of this alternative Sahl tradition in al-Andalus.

Finally, we shall attempt a comparative typology of letter mysticism in Islam, distinguishing between two types: by “type α” we name the classical Ṣūfī (as well as non-Ṣūfī) approach to Arabic letters, especially to the “enigmatic” *fawātiḥ*, the fourteen isolated letters at the beginning of twenty-nine Qurʾānic sūras; by “type β” we name the occult-theosophic approach which is characteristic of letter mysticism within the Shīʿī-Ismaʿīlī tradition as well as in the works of Andalusian mystics and neoplatonic philosophers, in particular Ibn Masarra and the twelfth-thirteenth-century Ibn al-ʿArabī. Our epistle belongs, no doubt, to the latter type. While type α recognizes the sacred and symbolic nature of the Arabic alphabet and especially of the *fawātiḥ*, it lacks any conception of a cosmogonic and cosmological scheme in which letters are seen as the building blocks of creation. On the other hand, type β speculations emphasize precisely this conception.

The introduction will be followed by an English translation of the epistle, divided into paragraphs; and a detailed, paragraph by paragraph, commentary. Arguments to support our hypotheses and comparative materials, which are summed up briefly in the introduction, will be presented in detail in the commentary. References to the texts of the epistle at hand, as well as to Ibn Masarra’s works, will be based on their respective pagination in the Chester Beatty manuscript.

## INTRODUCTION

### I. A General Analysis of the So-Called *Epistle on Letters*

In this short epistle, as our commentary will show in detail, two themes concerned with sacred language are interwoven: the cosmological aspects of letters, divine names and divine scripture on the one side and the

practical and even magical properties of names and letters on the other. In this respect, it is significant that the manuscript in which this epistle is included comprises of texts which are also associated with such esoteric fields of knowledge: the Chester Beatty collection no. 3168 contains manuals on letters, divine names, invocations, esoteric practices and similar topics. Noteworthy are the numerous philosophically-oriented terms profusely dispersed in our epistle; for example (references are to the paragraphs in our translation): *a'yān qā'ima* [2], *al-ṣūra al-rūḥāniyya* and *ṭabī'a* [4], the Aristotelian terms *naw'* and *ashkhāṣ* [14], the faculties of the human psyche which are named "powers" (*qiwā*), such as *al-quwwa al-nāṭiqa*, *al-bāṣira*, *al-nāshiqa*, *al-ghādhiya*, as well as other faculties [9]-[11], etc. The philosophers are explicitly mentioned in [4]. Philosophical terms are used alongside mythically-oriented ones (see, for example [13]). Similar associations and analogies between mythical and philosophical concepts are known also from Shī'i-Ismā'īlī writings, from the Epistles of Ikhwān al-ṣafā' and from the works of Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī (see below, sections III-IV). Despite this philosophical terminology, and unlike the works of Ibn Masarra, our epistle has no explicit references to specific neoplatonic schemes or terms.

This comparative platform allows us to propose that the ascription of this epistle to Sahl al-Tustarī is highly questionable. As we shall endeavor to show in detail throughout our paper, such esoteric-occult and mythical-philosophical orientation does not tally with Sahl's teaching: his sayings, which are adduced in abundance in classical Muslim sources and, in particular, in Ṣūfī compilations, are devoid of any such orientation. Significantly, Gerhard Böwering, who made an in-depth study of Sahl, doubts whether the epistle has been really written by Sahl.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these considerations related to contents and terminology, it is worth reiterating that the epistle is found in a unicum manuscript with no title and no explicit mention of an author. Moreover, Ibn Masarra, who, in his *Book on the Properties of Letters*, attributes to Sahl several statements on letters (see below, section III), does so without referring to any work by Sahl or to any other work from which he may have been quoting. His references must reflect, therefore, an oral tradition, which had been prevailing in

<sup>4</sup> See Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 17-18.

al-Andalus since the early tenth century and to which our first witness is Ibn Masarra himself (see also below, sections III- IV).<sup>5</sup>

Our epistle begins with a general statement attributed to Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī concerning letters, according to which letters are the foundations of all things (*uṣūl al-ashyāʾ*) [1]. From the text it is not clear where exactly Sahl's statement ends (see commentary to [1]). The next few paragraphs offer an explanation of this statement, conveying ideas and concepts related to cosmogonic and cosmological processes. This part seems to end at the beginning of [17], where Sahl is cited again.

The explanation given to Sahl's opening statement begins by describing the cosmogonic process by which creation takes place [2]-[3]. In this process, God's speech (*kalām allāh*), which is identified with His will (*irāda*) and with the objects of His knowledge (*ma'lūmāt*), becomes "detached" (*munfaṣila*) from God's hiddenness (*ghayb*). This detachment is brought about by means of the divine fiat *kun* ("Be!" – on this existential imperative, see commentary to [3]). According to our epistle, the divine fiat is identified with the primordial letters, which are described as "the foundations of [all] things". After discussing the divine fiat, *kun*, in its various aspects [4]-[5], the author goes on to discuss the divine names *huwa* ('He') and 'Allāh' – which he calls "divine attributes" (*ṣifāt*) – in the context of the process of creation. The discussion of these two attributes is strikingly reminiscent of Ismāʿīlī speculations ([6]-[7] and the commentary thereof).

Following the discussions concerning the most transcendent aspects of the creative process, the epistle now moves to discuss the lower levels of the cosmic hierarchy. In [8] and [12], a binary scheme unfolds, according to which creation is divided into two complementary aspects: a spiritual inner one (*bāṭin*) stemming from God's speech (*qawl*), and a physical external one (*ẓāhir*) stemming from God's action (*fiʿl*). This binary scheme corresponds precisely to the realm of letters: out of the twenty-eight letters (which the author designates as "faculties" (*qiwā*) of the Arabic alphabet, fourteen are "psychical" (*naḥsāniyya*) while the other fourteen are "natural" (*ṭabīʿiyya*). Thus, the twenty-eight letters (or powers) constitute the foundation of all created beings, be they physical or spiritual. [5] and [12]

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a saying by Sahl narrated orally and later inserted into writing, see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 73, vol. 3, p. 20.

elaborate on the image of the world as a divine book. This image is characteristic of the thought of the Ismāʿīlī Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ (on whom see below, section IV), and is relevant also for Ibn Masarra and for Ibn al-ʿArabī in their respective works.

In [9-11] the author digresses to discuss the letters *a-w-y* and the three faculties which correspond to them in the sublunar world: the rational, the animalistic and the natural (i.e., the vegetative-growing). This discussion is reminiscent of similar speculations which can be found in Ibn Masarra's *Book on the Properties of Letters* and in the epistles of Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, as well as in the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī. In [13], the author deals directly with the topic of the *fawātiḥ*, i.e. the fourteen mysterious letters found at the beginning of twenty-nine sūras of the Qurʾān. The author perceives the *fawātiḥ* as corresponding to the cosmological entities from which the world is created. His scheme in this regard is mythical rather than philosophical.

In [14-16] the elliptic and rather cryptic style and phraseology of our epistle should be noted. Although the title at the beginning of [14] ("Section on the Qurʾān") seems to suggest the introduction of a new subject, these three paragraphs form one textual unit and are thematically and conceptually linked with the previous discussion. The subject matter of the *fawātiḥ* is developed and the discussion here focuses on their relation to the Qurʾān. The author seems to envisage an all-inclusive (*jāmiʿ*) cosmological Qurʾān from which the revealed Qurʾānic text is derived (*wal-qurʾān rājiʿ ilayhā*). The cosmological Qurʾān is identified with the hundredth name of God, i.e. *allāh* (it is also said to be "the means of access, of proximity", *al-wasīla* – see commentary), and in this capacity it contains all the other ninety-nine divine names. The latter, in their turn, contain the entire knowledge of the revealed scripture in an undifferentiated manner (*wa-hiya jumal ʿilmihi*). Finally, these ninety-nine names are contained within the fourteen letters of the *fawātiḥ*. Thus, the *fawātiḥ* contain the divine names; the divine names contain, potentially and latently, the entire knowledge to be revealed in the Qurʾānic text, and the Qurʾān itself is contained in God's supreme name; this, in fact, is the celestial Qurʾān. It follows that the way to attain the knowledge encoded in the revealed scripture begins with deciphering the *fawātiḥ*, continues with the true understanding of the ninety-nine names, and culminates in reaching

the transcendent Qurʾān. This hermeneutical-mystical process leads to paradise; it can thus be described as salvific and eschatological. In [15], the two groups of letters of the Arabic alphabet – the fourteen *fawātiḥ* and the other fourteen letters named “external” (*ẓāhir*) – correspond to the lunar mansions: the fourteen “internal” mansions (*bāṭina*) and the fourteen “external” ones. Very similar speculations concerning the analogy of the letters to the lunar mansions appear also in the works of Ibn Masarra, of Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (*The Goal of the Sage*, on which see below, section IV) and in Ibn al-ʿArabī.

The epistle ends with a story about Ibrāhīm ibn Adham [17], narrated in the name of Sahl al-Tustarī. The purpose of this story is to illustrate the magical efficacy of invoking divine names, and in particular the special properties of the divine name contained in *sūra yāʾ sin*. The change in style and contents (see commentary) suggests that this final paragraph may have been added as an appendix to the epistle, linked simply by the ascription to Sahl al-Tustarī.

## II. Sahl al-Tustarī as Reflected in Classical Ṣūfī Sources

Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī, one of the most prominent figures in the Ṣūfī tradition, was born sometime around 200/815 in Tustar in the province of Ahwāz (south-western Persia). From childhood he was exposed to spiritual teachings, mainly through his maternal uncle Muḥammad b. Sawwār. From around 245/860 to 262/876 he was active in Tustar as an inspiring Ṣūfī teacher. After 262/876, having been forced to leave his hometown of Tustar, al-Tustarī moved to Baṣra, where he attracted many disciples and where he died a revered Ṣūfī teacher in 283/896.<sup>6</sup>

No extant work that can be shown to have been written by Sahl himself is known to us. Sahl’s teachings have come down mainly through the works of his disciples. Foremost among these works is the Qurʾān commentary, *Tafsīr al-qurʾān*, which, undoubtedly, represents Sahl’s authentic teachings, but which had been compiled by several of his prominent

<sup>6</sup> For an elaborate scholarly presentation of Sahl’s biography, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 43-75.

disciples. The complex and lengthy process of the redaction of this commentary has been masterfully analyzed by Gerhard Böwering in a monograph dedicated to Sahl al-Tustarī, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*. In addition, MS. Köprülü 727 has preserved three works which also reflect Sahl's authentic teachings: *Kalām sahl b. 'abd allāh*, *Kitāb al-sharḥ wal-bayān li-mā ashkala min kalām sahl* and *Kitāb al-mu'āraḍa wal-radd 'alā ahl al-firaq wa-ahl al-da'awā fīl-aḥwāl*. These, too, according to Böwering's analysis, were compiled and redacted by followers of Sahl's teachings, in particular, perhaps, by Aḥmad b. Sālim (d. 356/967), Sahl's direct disciple, and by the later 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣaqālī (d. end of fourth/tenth century).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Sahl's teachings passed on to his immediate circles of followers orally rather than in writing.

In addition to these texts, our knowledge of Sahl and his teachings derives from the numerous traditions related to him which have been collated into classical Ṣūfī literature. In the vast range of Ṣūfī compilations, from the tenth century onwards, Sahl emerges as a central, formidable figure. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), for example, who compiled one of the most enduring Ṣūfī manuals, *Kitāb al-luma' fī al-taṣawwuf*, was so enthralled by Sahl's reputation that he went to the latter's hometown of Tustar in search of reliable information about him.<sup>8</sup> Many references to Sahl are found in al-Sarrāj's manual as well as in *Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-madhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* by al-Kalābādhī (d. ca. 380/990), in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), in *Tahdhīb al-asrār* by al-Khargūshī (d. 406/1015), in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038), in *al-Risāla fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf* by al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), and in *Kashf al-maḥjūb* by al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī (d. ca. 465/1073).<sup>9</sup> Special mention should be made of *Qūt al-qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996). The fact that in the latter compilation

<sup>7</sup> See Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 11-18; on Aḥmad b. Sālim and the Sālīmiyya, see below. The *Kitāb al-mu'āraḍa wal-radd* was edited by Tunç, *Sahl b. 'Abdallāh at-Tustarī und die Sālīmiyya*, pp. 1-49 (Arabic text); it was published by Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrāhīm Ja'far in 1980 (Cairo: Dār al-Insān). For other works attributed to Sahl, most likely erroneously, see Böwering, pp. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> See al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, p. 316.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed references and analysis of these sources, as well as later ones, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 18-42.

we find an abundance of references to Sahl al-Tustarī is significant: Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī was a disciple of Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad b. Sālim, himself the son of Muḥammad b. Sālim (d. 297/909) who for many years had served Sahl and was his close disciple. The material related to Sahl in *Qūt al-qulūb* reflects the special position of Sahl in the line connecting Muḥammad b. Sālim, his son Aḥmad, and Abū Ṭālib. The Ibn Sālīm and their followers formed in Baṣra a theological-mystical school which became known as the Sālīmiyya and which considered Sahl al-Tustarī's teaching as its main source of inspiration.<sup>10</sup> Abū Ṭālib, as his sobriquet al-Makkī indicates, came originally from Mecca where, before arriving at Baṣra, he had studied with the Ṣūfī Abū Sa'īd b. al-A'rābī (d. 341/952).<sup>11</sup> The latter moved to Mecca from Baghdad after the death of al-Junayd (d. 298/910), Abū Sa'īd's teacher and the head of the Ṣūfī circle there. Abū Sa'īd was a key figure in the transmission of religious teachings from the center of the Islamic world to al-Andalus, as many Andalusians who stayed in Mecca studied with him. Based on the biographical sources, it transpires that what the Andalusians took from Abū Sa'īd pertained mainly to Ḥadīth and *zuhd*, i.e., to orthodox, pietistic and ascetical issues.<sup>12</sup> One can envisage a spatial-temporal axis connecting Baghdad, Baṣra, Mecca and al-Andalus during the tenth century. On this axis, without doubt, teachings originating in Baghdad and Baṣra passed to al-Andalus. We shall return to this axis in what follows.

From all the diverse sources mentioned above, a clear, coherent and consistent picture of Sahl al-Tustarī and his teachings emerges. Böwering aptly names it "the Tustarī tradition". In these sources, Sahl comes through as a charismatic Ṣūfī teacher imbibed from early childhood, through the influence of his maternal uncle Muḥammad b. Sawwār, with mystical sensitivities. At the same time, the sources insist on his piety, his ascetical leanings and his strict adherence to normative orthodoxy. The sources describe Sahl as frowning upon any extrovert exhibition of

<sup>10</sup> On the Sālīmiyya, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 89-99; see also *EF*, "Sālīmiyya", vol. 8, p. 993 (Massignon and Radtke) and the sources mentioned there; see also Tunç, *Sahl b. 'Abdallāh at-Tustarī und die Sālīmīya*.

<sup>11</sup> See Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 25ff.

<sup>12</sup> See Marin, "Abū Sa'īd ibn al-A'rābī", pp. 31-34.



mystical fervor.<sup>13</sup> Finally, there is no indication in these sources, including in his Qurʾānic *tafsīr*, of any interest on the part of Sahl in what can be named occult sciences.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Sahl in al-Andalus

As stated above at the beginning of this paper, a treatise on letters, found in a unicum manuscript of the Chester Beatty collection no. 3168, is attributed by scholars to Sahl al-Tustarī, although this short treatise appears in the manuscript with no title and no explicit author. This scholarly attribution stems from the association of Sahl with letter speculations in the work of the Andalusian mystic and neoplatonic philosopher, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Masarra (269/883-319/931).<sup>15</sup> In his *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, which is also included in the same codex (no. 3168, ff. 129-166), Ibn Masarra refers to Sahl in three passages. In the first passage, Ibn Masarra states: “Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī said that the letters are the [primordial] dust (*habāʾ*); they are the foundation of things at the beginning, when things were being created (*aṣl al-ashyāʾ fī awwal khilqatihā*). From the letters the order was composed and the dominion became manifest (*wa-minhā taʾallafa al-amr wa-ṣahara al-mulk*)”. In the second passage, Sahl is quoted as saying: “all created beings were created by means of [the letters] *kāf* and *nūn* [= *kun*]”. In the third passage, Ibn Masarra attributes to Sahl the following commentary on Q. 68:1: “‘By the pen’, [the pen] is composed of three letters: *qāf*, *lām*, *mīm*. *Qāf* [refers to] the decree (*qadar*), *lām* to justice (ʿ*adl*) and *mīm* to volition (*mashīʾa*)”.<sup>16</sup> These statements, especially the first two, convey a perception of letters as building blocks in cosmogonic and cosmological processes.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, al-Sarrāj, *al-Lumaʿ*, p. 292; also Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 71-73; see also Tunç, *Sahl b. ʿAbdallāh al-Tustarī und die Sālīmīya*, pp. 7-8; Reinert, *Die Lehre vom tawakkul im klassischen Sufik*, pp. 96, 319 et passim.

<sup>14</sup> For Sahl’s interpretation of the *fawātiḥ*, see below, section V and commentary to [13].

<sup>15</sup> For Ibn Masarra’s biography and works, as well as the questions relating to his intellectual and religious affiliations, see Stroumsa and Sviri, “The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus”, pp. 201-215 and the sources cited there.

<sup>16</sup> See MS Chester Beatty collection no. 3168, ff. 135, 155, 159; references to folios appear also in the editions of Jaʿfar and Garrido, for which see bibliography.

Indeed, such a perception appears under Sahl's name in the opening paragraph of the epistle which this paper aims to discuss: "Concerning letters, Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh said: God in His wisdom made the letters the foundation (*aṣl*) from which speech may be constructed. This is because speech breaks up into many parts; each of these parts breaks up into named entities; named entities break up into letters, and letters break up into the [primordial] dust (*habā'*). They are the foundations of [all] things".<sup>17</sup>

These statements attributed to Sahl al-Tustarī, both by Ibn Masarra and by the unnamed author of our epistle, have no parallels neither in the classical Ṣūfī sources mentioned above nor in Sahl's *Tafsīr*. Furthermore, the perception conveyed by these statements does not tally with the bulk of Sahl's teachings referred to above as "the Tustarī tradition". On the basis of Ibn Masarra's evidence, it appears that in al-Andalus, around the turn of the tenth century, a tradition was in circulation associating Sahl al-Tustarī with letter speculations in a cosmogonic context. According to this tradition, all creation originated in letters, which, in themselves, constitute the so-called "primordial dust" (*habā'*). The concept of "dust" as primordial matter requires elaboration: to the best of our knowledge, it is known neither in classical Ṣūfī sources nor in "the Tustarī tradition". In the Qur'ān, the word *habā'* appears twice (25:23 and 56:6) as an expression of the transiency and insignificance of created things; in both verses the expression comes in an eschatological context. In Sahl's *Tafsīr*, no commentaries to these two occurrences of *habā'* are offered; neither could we find this term, other than in its plain Qur'ānic sense, in sayings attributed to Sahl.<sup>18</sup> In contradistinction, the cosmological interpretation of the *habā'* appears in the neoplatonic-Shī'ī corpus attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān, allegedly a disciple of the Shī'ī Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). This corpus, which deals with alchemy and other occult sciences and

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis, see below, our commentary to this paragraph.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 158: "Sahl used to say: all knowledge is related to this [material] world; acting according to this knowledge is related to the hereafter; yet every act is as dust except pure devotion" (*wa-kāna sahl yaqūlu al-'ilm kulluhu dunyā wal-ākhirā minhu al-'amal bihi wal-'amal habā' illā al-ikhlās*). Note that in Böwering's comparative breakdown of Sahl's *Tafsīr*, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 113-126, there are no references to these verses or to the term *habā'*.

which contains works by various early authors, was compiled during the second half of the ninth and the first half of the tenth century. It includes neoplatonic as well as Shīʿī elements – some of which are Ismāʿīlī or bear resemblance to various Ismāʿīlī notions.<sup>19</sup> In the Jābirian corpus, the *habāʾ* of sūra 25:23 is interpreted as referring to the hypostasis which, in the hierarchy of being, comes below the Universal Soul (*al-naḥs al-kullīyya*). According to the Jābirian corpus, from this cosmological *habāʾ* the physical world emanates; similarly to Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* and to our unnamed epistle, *habāʾ* is defined in the Jābirian corpus too as “the foundation of all things” (*aṣl al-ashyāʾ kullihā*).<sup>20</sup> It is precisely this Jābirian concept of *habāʾ* which is echoed in Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* as well as in our unnamed epistle.

A later significant witness to this theory is the twelfth-thirteenth-century Andalusian mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240). In a similar fashion to the Jābirian scheme, Ibn al-ʿArabī, too, places the *habāʾ* beneath the Universal Soul. Furthermore, he attributes this notion of *habāʾ* both to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and to Sahl al-Tustarī.<sup>21</sup> As for letters and their position in the cosmogonic process, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, letters emanate in a divine act of creation from the *ʿamāʾ*, a mythic dark cloud, which appears in a *ḥadīth* concerning the question where God was before creation.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Ibn al-ʿArabī at times identifies the *habāʾ* with the *ʿamāʾ* and thus establishes a semantic connection, or even identification, between *habāʾ* and *ʿamāʾ*.<sup>23</sup> In other words: letters, whether inhering in the “dust” or in the “cloud”,

<sup>19</sup> On the dating, authorship, and the Shīʿī and Ismāʿīlī motifs in the Jābirian corpus see Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1943, pp. xvii-lxv; on its neoplatonic elements see idem, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 135-185. See also *EP*, “Djābir ibn Ḥayyān”, vol. 2, pp. 357-359 (P. Kraus and M. Plessner); Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*.

<sup>20</sup> See Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 10 n. 3, 142, 152, 153 n. 2, 154 n. 6, 170 n. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, vol. 1, ch. 2, p. 247; ch. 6, pp. 320, 323 (cf. ch. 13, p. 376); ch. 7, p. 328; ch. 11, p. 361; vol. 4, ch. 198, pp. 43, 110-113; ch. 295, p. 575.

<sup>22</sup> For this *ḥadīth*, see, for example, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 12, p. 481, no. 16132: “...ayna kāna rabbunā ʿazza wa-jalla qabla an yakhlūqa khalqahu? Qāla [al-rasūl]: kāna fī ʿamāʾ...”.

<sup>23</sup> Such a connection may be found already in Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 155; cf. Garrido's edition of Ibn Masarra's work, “Edición crítica del *K. Jawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*”, p. 79, where she reads *wal-ʿamāʾ wal-habāʾ* instead of *wal-ʿamāʾ wa-huwa al-habāʾ*. It is apparent that the text here may be corrupt, hence our hesitation.

belong to the primordial phases of creation. Significantly, such thought provoking nexus of medieval neoplatonic mystical philosophy, letter mysticism and Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī ideas has been shown to have prevailed in al-Andalus among Muslim as well as Jewish authors.<sup>24</sup>

We conclude, therefore, that in al-Andalus there existed two “Tustarī traditions”: “the Tustarī tradition” as it was known in Šūfī circles in the east, and, from Ibn Masarra’s time onward, a different “Andalusian Tustarī tradition” in which letter speculations, in the framework of neoplatonic esoteric teachings, were attributed to Sahl.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV. Esoteric Teachings in al-Andalus

How to explain the emergence and formation of such an “Andalusian Sahl tradition”? To answer this, we must first examine the milieu in tenth-century al-Andalus in which esoteric teachings, such as those which we find in Ibn Masarra’s works, could have prevailed. In addition to Ibn Masarra’s works, we have two other literary witnesses to this milieu relevant for our discussion: *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (*The Goal of the Sage*, known in the Latin world as *Picatrix*) and *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ* (*Epistles of the Sincere Brethren*).<sup>26</sup> These sources belong to the Arabic neoplatonic-hermetic tradition and show clear affinities to the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī corpus attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān.<sup>27</sup> The *Ghāya*, which deals mainly with magic and

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Pines, “La longue récénsion”; idem, “Shīʿite Terms and Conceptions”; idem, “*Ruḥāniyyot*”; Krinis, *The Idea of the Chosen People*; Stroumsa, “Ibn Masarra and the Beginnings of Mystical Thought in al-Andalus”; Ebstein, “Secrecy in Ismāʿīlī Tradition”; Goldreich, “The Theology of the *Iyyun* Circle”; Heller-Wilensky, “The First Created Being”.

<sup>25</sup> For references to Sahl in Andalusian sources in addition to Ibn Masarra’s works, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 37, 39–40, 48.

<sup>26</sup> On *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, see Ritter and Plessner, *Picatrix*; Pingree, “Some of the Sources”; on the *Rasāʾil*, see Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*; El-Bizri, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*; Daftari, *Ismāʿīlī Literature*, p. 166 and the references cited there; for the translation of the name Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, see de Callatāy, *Ikhwan al-Safaʾ*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> On the Jābirian corpus and the Epistles of the Ikhwān, see Marquet, *La philosophie des alchimistes*; on the Jābirian corpus and its influence on the *Ghāya*, see pseudo-al-Majrīṭī, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, pp. 147–148; Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 64 n. 6, 104 n. 12, 106 n. 8, 173 n. 1, 193 n. 11; Pingree, “Some of the Sources”, pp. 2–3; on the Epistles of the Ikhwān and the *Ghāya/Rutbat al-ḥakīm*, see Fierro, “Bāṭinism in al-Andalus”, pp. 94, 96, 106–108; Poonawala, “Why we need”, p. 35.

astrology in a neoplatonic framework, was composed in al-Andalus in the first half of the eleventh century or as early as the middle of the tenth century.<sup>28</sup> The *Rasā'il* were composed most likely in Baṣra during the tenth century, presumably by an Ismā'īlī group of intellectuals. They deal with all branches of sciences known in the medieval Muslim world. They are specifically interested in neoplatonic philosophy, religious issues, eschatology, magic and astrology. The knowledge offered to the reader of the *Rasā'il* is not merely informative, but is rather morally and spiritually oriented. In al-Andalus, due to their esoteric nature and Shī'ī-Ismā'īlī resonances, these texts were viewed with suspicion by orthodox circles. Nevertheless, that they were widely circulated in al-Andalus can be corroborated not only by Muslim sources, but also by contemporary Jewish ones.<sup>29</sup>

The authorship of *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, traditionally ascribed to the Andalusian mathematician and astronomer Abū al-Qāsim Maslama b. Aḥmad al-Majrīṭī (d. ca. 398/1007), had been queried in modern scholarship. Most scholars who dealt with this question argued that, although the author cannot be identified with Maslama al-Majrīṭī, the work must have been composed sometime during the first half of the eleventh century.<sup>30</sup> However, Maribel Fierro has convincingly argued that this esoteric work was, in fact, composed sometime in the middle of the tenth century by a certain Abū al-Qāsim Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964) who, according to biographical sources, had dealt with traditional Muslim sciences (Ḥadīth) as well as with magic.<sup>31</sup> The latter travelled extensively in the eastern Muslim world in search of religious knowledge and studied with many teachers. In Mecca he studied with the above mentioned Abū

<sup>28</sup> See Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus".

<sup>29</sup> On Ibn Masarra and the Ikhwān, see Stroumsa and Sviri, "The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus", pp. 210 note 37, 214-215; on the influence of the Ikhwān on Ibn al-'Arabī, see Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy*, pp. 182, 184-188, and see also Index, s.v. "Ikhwānuṣ-Ṣafā" and "Ismā'īlīs"; on the Ikhwān in Jewish circles, see Eliyahu, "Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsi"; Krinis, *The Idea of the Chosen People*, pp. 30-31; on the influence of the *Ghāya* on medieval Jewish authors, see Plessner, "Medieval Definition"; Pines, "*Rūḥāniyyot*", pp. 518-519; Idel, "Talismanic language", especially p. 24; see also our commentary to [17].

<sup>30</sup> For a summary of the scholarly opinions on this issue, see Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", pp. 92ff.

<sup>31</sup> See Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", pp. 87ff, especially p. 90.

Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī and in Baṣra with Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sālīm. As mentioned above (section II), Abū Saʿīd was a central figure for many Andalusians who came to Mecca in order to acquire religious knowledge. As for Ibn Sālīm, he and his father formed in Baṣra the Sālīmiyya, a school which followed Sahl al-Tustarī's teachings. As will be remembered, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, whose *Qūt al-qulūb* incorporates much of Sahl's sayings, was also a disciple of Abū Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī in Mecca, before moving to Baṣra to study with Ibn Sālīm. Thus, an association can be established among the following figures: Sahl al-Tustarī, Ibn Sālīm father and son, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Abū Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī and Maslama al-Qurṭubī. Prosopographically speaking, these figures are situated on the tenth century axis mentioned above connecting Baṣra, Mecca and al-Andalus.<sup>32</sup>

Among these figures, one name stands out: that of Maslama al-Qurṭubī. While the other figures can be seen as orthodox pietists and mystics, al-Qurṭubī is said to have engaged in occult sciences. Moreover, if we accept Fierro's convincing argument concerning his authorship of *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, it follows that al-Qurṭubī played an important role in introducing esoteric teachings into al-Andalus. It is also noteworthy that, according to Fierro and in contrast to prevailing opinions in scholarship, it is perhaps this tenth-century Maslama al-Qurṭubī who brought the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ* to al-Andalus rather than the later Maslama al-Majrīfī or his disciple, Abū al-Ḥakam al-Kirmānī (d. ca. 468/1075).<sup>33</sup> We concur with Fierro that the circulation of such occult-esoteric materials as the *Ghāya* and the *Rasāʾil* in tenth century al-Andalus, especially when smacking of Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī speculations, must have met with suspicion and opposition by the orthodox legalists and their supporting rulers and that this highly problematic situation brought about attempts at concealment and secrecy. This may account for the confusion concerning the authorship of the *Ghāya* and the identity of those who introduced the *Rasāʾil* to al-Andalus.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For possible affiliations of some of these figures with the Mālikī School of law, which was the predominant school in al-Andalus, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>33</sup> See Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", pp. 107-108; for opinions concerning the introduction of the *Rasāʾil* to al-Andalus by al-Majrīfī and his pupil, see, for example, Poonawala, "Why We Need", pp. 34-35.

<sup>34</sup> See also Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", pp. 98ff. Note that *al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa* (*The Comprehensive Epistle*), written by the Ikhwān as a summary of their epistles, but

Against this background, one can appreciate the difficulty in the circulation and reception of letter speculations such as those dealt with by Ibn Masarra. As seen above, and as will be elaborated below, this type of letter speculations differs from the symbolic and orthodox type found in the Sunnite east. It is characteristic, however, of the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī world, in which letter speculations are part and parcel of a cosmological and cosmogonic worldview either of a mythical nature or in the framework of neoplatonic mystical philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Ibn Masarra met with opposition both in al-Andalus and in the east.<sup>36</sup> According to the Andalusian chronicler Ibn al-Faraḍī (d. 403/1013), Abū Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sālīm both composed refutations against Ibn Masarra.<sup>37</sup> As will be remembered, Maslama al-Qurṭubī studied under both these eastern scholars and mystics. Although there is no indication in our sources as to the contents of their refutations, we may assume that they objected to Ibn Masarra's esoteric teachings. It is also possible that they, and in particular Ibn Sālīm (Sahl's disciple), may have objected to Ibn Masarra's attribution of such teachings to Sahl al-Tustarī. Among the figures situated on the axis mentioned above connecting Baṣra, Mecca and al-Andalus, there seems to have been an ongoing disagreement as regards esoteric and occult teachings.<sup>38</sup>

which contains additional esoteric elements, is also attributed to Maslama al-Majrīṭī. In our opinion, this ascription may also indicate the need to disguise the identity of its real author/s; cf. Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", pp. 101-102 and 107-108. For the esoteric elements of the *Risāla al-jāmiʿa*, see, for example, Ebstein, "Secrecy", pp. 320-326; Pines, "Shiʿite Terms and Conceptions", pp. 174-178.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, pp. 38-52; Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, pp. 40-51; idem, *al-ʿĀlim wal-ghulām*, pp. 14-16; al-Rāzī, *Iṣṭāḥ*, pp. 38-39, 204-207; idem, *Kitāb al-zīna*, vol. 1, pp. 66-68; al-Sijistānī, *Yanābīʿ*, pp. 8-15, 17-19, 70-73, 90-94; idem, *Iftikhār*, pp. 123-137.

<sup>36</sup> On the opposition to Ibn Masarra and the persecution of his disciples in al-Andalus, see Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus", p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> See Ibn al-Faraḍī, *Ulamāʾ al-andalus*, p. 338: *wa-qad radda ʿalayhi jamāʿa min ahl al-mashriq minhum aḥmad b. muḥammad b. ziyād al-aʿrābī wa-aḥmad b. muḥammad b. sālīm al-tustarī*.

<sup>38</sup> For possible disputes within the circle of Ibn al-Aʿrābī's Andalusian disciples concerning esoteric teachings, see Marin, "Abū Saʿīd ibn al-Aʿrābī", pp. 31-34. According to Marin, two of these Andalusian disciples (Muḥammad b. Aṣṣagh b. Labīb, d. 327/938-9 and Muḥammad b. Fātiḥ) engaged in *ʿilm al-bāṭin*; another disciple (Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar al-Qaysī, d. 382/992) was a follower of Ibn Masarra. In addition, Maslama

To go back to our initial question: how can we explain the emergence of an esoteric “Andalusian Tustarī tradition”? As can be seen from the writings of Ibn Masarra, as well as from *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*, neoplatonic esoteric teachings from the east, affiliated with the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī world, circulated in tenth-century al-Andalus. Due to orthodox restrictions and threats, these teachings had to be guarded under a guise of secrecy and apocryphal attributions. It is plausible that these circumstances prompted Ibn Masarra to rely on Sahl al-Tustarī as a legitimizing orthodox authority in his treatise on letters. That Sahl could have been a revered name in al-Andalus is corroborated by the passage of eastern teachings and traditions to al-Andalus via the axis Baṣra-Mecca-al-Andalus mentioned above, and through the acquaintance of Andalusians with Abū Saʿīd b. al-Aʿrābī and Ibn Sālim. All this does not necessarily imply that Ibn Masarra alone is responsible for the association of esoteric teachings with Sahl al-Tustarī. It is quite possible that among Sahl’s disciples some were inclined towards such teachings. Since Sahl left no written work that is known to us, and since his teachings passed on orally, it is only natural that different versions and interpretations of them emerged among his followers and in subsequent generations.<sup>39</sup>

Esoteric teachings in the formative period of Islamic mysticism have been associated also with the name of Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/860). Based on the Andalusian chronicler Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī (d. 462/1070), and emphasizing the birthplace of Dhū al-Nūn in Ikhmīm in upper Egypt, Asín Palacios argued that Dhū al-Nūn was “the continuer ... of the Hermetic theosophy of ancient Egypt...”.<sup>40</sup> In relating to the art of alchemy and esoteric sciences at large (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*), Ṣāʿid indeed associates Dhū al-Nūn with the well-known alchemist and esotericist Jābir b. Ḥayyān (on him see above, section III). In fact, he also associates Jābir with al-Ḥārith

b. al-Qāsim, the author of the *Ghāya* according to Fierro as well as a disciple of Ibn al-Aʿrābī, was criticized by yet another Andalusian disciple of Abū Saʿīd, the traditionist and judge Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Yahyā Ibn Mufarrij al-Qāḍī (d. 380/990).

<sup>39</sup> Note that, according to al-Sarrāj, among Sahl’s disciples two were engaged in *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, “the science of letters” (al-Ṣubayḥī) and alchemy (Iṣḥāq b. Aḥmad) – see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 54-55, 80, 84-85.

<sup>40</sup> See Palacios, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, Appendix V, pp. 165-166; see also Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallāj*, vol. 3, p. 353; idem, *Essay on the Origins*, pp. 141, 143 (= *Essai*, pp. 205, 207); cf. Böwering, “The Major Sources”, p. 56, note 151.



al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and Sahl al-Tustarī: “[Jābir] pursued the science known as ‘the esoteric science’ (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*). This is the path of those Muslims who adhere to Sūfism (*wa-huwa madhhab al-mutaṣawwifīn min ahl al-islām*), such as al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī and Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī and their likes.”<sup>41</sup> Another intriguing statement in this regard, connecting Dhū al-Nūn with Sahl al-Tustarī, is found in the works of Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191). According to him, the Pythagorean tradition passed into Islam via Dhū al-Nūn and from him to Sahl al-Tustarī. In another statement, al-Suhrawardī links Sahl al-Tustarī with the Platonic tradition.<sup>42</sup> In trying to assess the meanings of these statements, we must discern between the historical relationship between Dhū al-Nūn and Sahl al-Tustarī on the one hand, and the interpretation assigned to this relationship by medieval sources and modern scholars on the other. Indeed, several anecdotes in Sūfī sources, diligently collected and analyzed by Böwering, testify to a personal one-to-one relationship between Sahl and Dhū al-Nūn. Some of these anecdotes suggest that Sahl possibly considered Dhū al-Nūn as one of his masters. According to Böwering’s analysis, despite the possibility that Sahl was aware of (and perhaps even acquainted with) the art of alchemy, there is no evidence that this indeed was the contents of the teachings that might have passed from Dhū al-Nūn to Sahl.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Ṣā’id’s inclusion of al-Muḥāsibī in the list of those who were inspired by the Jābirian teachings is clearly erroneous, for, as is universally accepted, there is nothing alchemical or esoteric in the thought of this early Sunnite mystic from Baghdad. It follows, therefore, that such statements as those found in Ṣā’id and al-Suhrawardī’s works, linking Sahl or Dhū al-Nūn with esoteric teachings, reflect these

<sup>41</sup> See Ṣā’id al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt al-umam*, pp. 152-153; see also al-Qifī, *Ta’rīkh al-ḥukamā’*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>42</sup> See Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>43</sup> See Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, pp. 50-55. Note that early mystics’ acquaintance with the esoteric sciences does not imply necessarily their adoption and practice of these sciences; on the contrary, this acquaintance may have provoked some of them to alienate themselves from esoteric practices in favour of pursuing an inner mystical path. For an example of this attitude, see al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Buduwaw Sha’n*, p. 27 (= Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, p. 30); cf. the anecdote concerning Sahl in which he throws away the products of an alchemical practice of one of his students – see above, references in note 39.

writers' own perception of the development and nature of Islamic mysticism. In this perception, there is no differentiation between those mystical trends within Islam which derive from the hermetic, Pythagorean or neoplatonic traditions and between classical Ṣūfism, with its emphasis on psychological transformation and ethical self perfection. It is this confusion between two different mystical types – a confusion which can be discerned in medieval writings as well as in modern scholarship (Ṣāʿīd, Suhrawardī, Palacios etc.) – which has meshed together such Ṣūfī masters as al-Muḥāsibī, Dhū al-Nūn and al-Tustarī with esoteric trends as those found in the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī tradition and in the writings of Ibn Masarra.<sup>44</sup>

## V. Letter Mysticism in Islam: a Typology

As stated above, in Medieval Islamic mystical literature, one can distinguish between two types of letter speculations. The most familiar type, what we have called “type  $\alpha$ ”, is found in both orthodox Islamic literature and in classical Ṣūfī texts. This type reflects a symbolic and etymological approach to the Arabic alphabet and especially to the *fawātiḥ*, i.e., the fourteen isolated and mysterious letters at the beginning of twenty-nine Qurʾānic sūras. These cryptic letters no doubt strengthened the sense of sacredness and mystery attached to the Qurʾān and to the Arabic language. Type  $\alpha$  approach is overwhelmingly prevalent in classical Qurʾān commentaries. Commenting on the letters *a-l-m* in sūra 2:1, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) – to take a canonical example – brings a lengthy list of traditions and views concerning the purported meanings of these letters. Among these views are the following: that these letters stand for one of God's names or for His “greatest name” (*ism allāh al-aʿẓam*); that these letters are acronyms – for example, the letter *alif* represents *ālāʾ allāh* (God's favors), the letter *lām* represents *luṭf* (divine kindness) and the letter *mīm* represents *majd* (divine glory); according to another tradition that al-Ṭabarī adduces, these letters stand for *anā allāh aʿlam* (I, God, know); or that these letters are a secret, “the secret of the Qurʾān” (*sirr al-qurʾān*); or that these

<sup>44</sup> As commented by Böweinrg (*The Mystical Vision*, p. 51), the figure of Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, and especially the question of his role in transmitting esoteric teachings, deserves an in-depth study.

letters compose a divine oath (*qasam*).<sup>45</sup> Now, all these views appear also in Sahl al-Tustarī's commentary to the Qur'ān, to which he adds also more Ṣūfī-oriented speculations (on Sahl's commentary, see above, section II). Thus, for example, in his commentary to sūra 2:1, and in addition to the material found in al-Ṭabarī, Sahl writes: "*Alif lām mīm... alif* namely Allāh, *lām* namely the servant (*al-'abd* = man), and *mīm* namely Muḥammad, may Allāh's blessings be upon him. This, in order [to imply] that the servant may attach (*yattaṣil*) himself to his Lord by means of his testimony of God's oneness (*min makān tawḥīdihi*) and by means of following in the footsteps of His Prophet (*wa-iqtidā'ihī bi-nabiyyihī*)."<sup>46</sup> By using the method of acronyms, found already in early traditional exegesis, Sahl emphasizes the common Ṣūfī notion of man approaching God's proximity while maintaining the prophetic *sunna*. However, all these views, be they canonical or specific to Sahl, do not show any conception of letters as building blocks of creation in a cosmogonic and cosmological context.<sup>47</sup>

As for what we have named "type β", it reflects an approach which views language, and in particular letters, as the primordial building blocks of the cosmos. This type is found in the Shī'ī-Ismā'īlī tradition, in Andalusian letter mysticism as, for example, in the writings of Ibn Masarra and Ibn al-'Arabī and also in our unnamed epistle.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 1, pp. 129-142.

<sup>46</sup> See Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, p. 8; see also al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 46-47; also al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, vol. 1, pp. 28-29.

<sup>47</sup> For the cosmological interpretation of the *fawātiḥ* in our unnamed epistle, see [13] and our commentary thereof; concerning the lack of any reference to the cosmological *habā'* in Sahl's *Tafsīr*, see above section III. For additional references concerning letters in Islam, see Svirī, "Words of Power", esp. notes 1-4.

<sup>48</sup> Note that a twofold typology is suggested also by Denis Gril in his elaborate introduction to the second chapter of Ibn al-'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* whose subject matter is letters. In Gril's perception, Sahl and Ibn Masarra belong to a type which he characterizes as "metaphysical, spiritual, and eschatological, and inspired by the Qur'ān", and which "is represented by both esoteric Shī'ism and *taṣawwuf*." This type, according to Gril, is contrasted with the type found in the Jābirian corpus and in the Epistles of Ikhwān al-ṣafā'; the latter Gril defines as "cosmological and Hellenic in origin" – see Gril, "The Science of Letters," p. 146; also Ja'far, *Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, pp. 360-363; Lory, *La Science des lettres en Islam*, pp. 77-88 and Addas, "Andalusī Mysticism", pp. 917-918. In our view, however, based on the comparative and analytical study proposed here, neither Ibn Masarra nor the unnamed author of the epistle at hand belong to the Ṣūfī tradition of letter speculations; rather, their works exhibit a clear affiliation with the neoplatonic

In defending the attribution of the epistle at hand to Sahl al-Tustarī, its editors, Jaʿfar and Garrido, refer to a statement of Sahl concerning the letter *alif*, found in al-Sarrāj’s *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*.<sup>49</sup> This statement runs as follows: “*Alif* is the first letter and the greatest among all letters (*al-alif awwal al-ḥurūf wa-aʿẓam al-ḥurūf*)”. According to the explanation following this statement in al-Sarrāj’s compilation, *alif* is a sign (*ishāra*) pointing to God: “Allāh is He who joins things together (*allafa bayna al-ashyāʾ*) while separating Himself from things (*wa-infarada ʿan al-ashyāʾ*)”.<sup>50</sup> This citation clearly conveys a totally different conception of letters than what is attributed to Sahl by Ibn Masarra and in our epistle (see above section III): it is devoid of any cosmogonic and cosmological speculations in relation to letters; rather, it assigns to letters, in this case to *alif*, a symbolic signification strengthened by etymological considerations. It concurs with similar explanations of the symbolic significance of letters, especially of the *fawātiḥ*, prevalent in Ṣūfī literature as well as in Orthodox Qurʾānic exegesis.<sup>51</sup>

## VI. Concluding Remarks

This untitled epistle, whoever its author, presents a type of letter speculations which is strikingly at odds with the “Tustarī tradition” borne out by most Ṣūfī sources, even where enigmatic letters and divine names are concerned. To accept Sahl’s authorship of this epistle would mean to reassess all that we know about Sahl from the many sources, mostly Ṣūfī, which discuss or mention him. If, quantitatively and qualitatively, we

type of mystical philosophy akin to that of the Ikhwān and other Ismāʿīlī authors (see above, our references to Ismāʿīlī literature, at note 35). We concur, however, with Gril in respect of the synthesis achieved by Ibn al-ʿArabī: he, indeed, combines in his vast œuvre all the aforementioned types and trends.

<sup>49</sup> Jaʿfar, *Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, p. 364, note 2; Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, p. 73 and note 24; eadem, “El Tratado de las letras”, p. 96, note 28.

<sup>50</sup> See al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, p. 89; cf. Sahl, *Tafsīr*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> This is true also regarding other statements in Sahl’s *Tafsīr*, to which Jaʿfar refers as “external evidence” of Sahl’s alleged authorship of the epistle (*Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, p. 364; see also Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, p. 73, notes 21-22). These statements are rich with mystical allusions to, and even experiences of, God’s names. From a Ṣūfī perspective they are indeed experiential and special. However, from a typological perspective they clearly belong to type *α* rather than to type *β*.

weigh the two types of statements attributed to Sahl against one another – the traditional Sahl on the one hand and the occult-oriented Sahl (allegedly the author of this epistle) on the other – the overwhelming predominance of the traditional Sahl material as opposed to the paucity of the alternative Sahl material suggests that the two Sahl corpora cannot be considered to have derived from the same person. At the current stage of our acquaintance with and study of Sahl al-Tustarī, it can, therefore, be concluded that Sahl's authorship of the epistle at hand is erroneous.

As we have noted, the first testimony of an occult-oriented Sahl is found in Ibn Masarra's work. Ibn Masarra must have held a tradition, presumably an oral one, which associated letter speculations of this philosophical-esoteric type (type β) with Sahl al-Tustarī (on the "Andalusian Tustarī tradition", see above, section III-IV). Such a tradition may have propagated during the late ninth and early tenth centuries in the East among certain personalities associated with the Tustarian-Sālimiyya circles and may have passed on to al-Andalus via the axis connecting it with Baṣra and Mecca (on this axis, see sections III-IV). In al-Andalus, this esoteric-oriented tradition became conflated with occult-philosophical teachings which had been introduced to al-Andalus at about the same time and probably via the same axis, such as those found in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā'*. In these teachings, which belong to the neoplatonic-Hermetic tradition in Islam, letter mysticism is significantly more predominant than in classical eastern Ṣūfism. Moreover, it seems likely that eastern Ṣūfism tried hard to avoid occult and philosophical speculations to the point of censoring them out from its literary corpus (see section V). The development of Islamic mysticism in al-Andalus, however, took a different course and was, from its start, colored by neoplatonic mystical philosophy. Typically, therefore, after Ibn Masarra, this "Andalusian Tustarī tradition" can be found also in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī (see our discussion on the *ḥabā'*, section III).

As for the relation between Ibn Masarra's *Book on the Properties of Letters* and the epistle at hand, both contain very similar ideas and speculations as regards sacred language (see references to Ibn Masarra throughout our commentary) and both attribute statements in this regard to Sahl al-Tustarī (see above, section III). However, there are also important differences between the two: firstly, certain discussions in our epistle

seem to be much more concise and even elliptic compared with parallel discussions in Ibn Masarra's work (see, for example, our commentary to [3] on the cluster of *k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ*). Secondly, in contradistinction to Ibn Masarra, our author seems to purposely avoid any neoplatonic schemes and terms (see commentary to [6] concerning the divine names *huwa* and *allāh*, as well as commentary to [7] and [14]), though he shows familiarity with some philosophical concepts (see above, section I and [4]). Thirdly, the epistle at hand contains idiosyncratic notions which are not found in Ibn Masarra's work (see commentary to [4] on *al-kun al-aʿzam* and also commentary to [5], [8] and [12]).

These differences make it difficult to accept the hypothesis that Ibn Masarra was influenced by the epistle at hand.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the fact that in our epistle certain statements are articulated only in a brief and at times cryptic and referential manner suggests that our author may have assumed a shared-knowledge in their regard, for which an earlier date than Ibn Masarra is difficult to conceive. Our assumption of a dating later than Ibn Masarra is corroborated by the almost verbatim parallels which are found in *Shams al-maʿārif*, a magical-astrological manual on divine names and letters by the thirteenth-century North-African author al-Būnī (see commentary to [13] and [17]).<sup>53</sup> Incidentally, the copyist of the Chester Beatty collection seems to be a near contemporary of al-Būnī.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in all likelihood, our epistle is later than Ibn Masarra's work. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the epistle at hand, or the teachings of the Ṣūfī Sahl al-Tustarī as reflected in the "Tustarī Tradition" (see above, section II), could have had any direct influence on Ibn Masarra's *Book on the Properties of Letters*. Whether our unnamed epistle was compiled by al-Būnī himself, or by a contemporary and associate of al-Būnī, remains a moot question.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Garrido, "Estudio y edición", pp. 67, 68 n. 2, 69 n. 6, 71-72, 74; eadem, "El *Tratado de las letras*", pp. 87, 89.

<sup>53</sup> On *Shams al-maʿārif* and its author, see *EP*<sup>2</sup>, "al-Būnī, Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. ʿAlī", vol 12, p. 156 (A. Dietrich); Lory *La Science des lettres*, pp. 91-112. Note that the pharmacist parable and its purport in [17] can be found also in the eleventh-twelfth-century Jewish author Judah Halevi, who was greatly influenced by Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī teachings; see commentary to this paragraph.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Būnī died presumably in Cairo in 622/1225; according to Garrido, our manuscript collection was copied in Cairo in 686-687/1287-1288 – see "Estudio y edición", p. 70.

## TRANSLATION

{166} In the name of God the Compassionate and the Merciful. May God's prayer and blessings be upon our master Muḥammad and his family and companions.

[1] Concerning letters, Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh said: God in His wisdom made the letters the foundation from which speech may be constructed. This is because speech breaks up into many parts; each of these parts breaks up into named entities; named entities break up into letters, and letters break up into the [primordial] dust. They are the foundations of [all] things.

[2] {167} The difference between the speech of human beings and the speech of God, may He be exalted, is this: human beings' speech is laid down by agreement and convention. It is a construction occurring bit by bit in the air, then vanishing and disappearing in the same manner, [it] never endures. God's speech, however, is firm entities and shining spiritual lights: they are His will and the objects of His knowledge which have become detached from His hiddenness.

[3] The power (*al-quwwa*) that detaches them is 'Be!' (*kun*); *kun* brings speech into manifestation; it encompasses the [primordial] dust; it is the letters. Air carries the letters; the letters are the uncompounded spiritual power; they are the foundation of [all] things. This is why the Mightiest of sayers placed the *kāf* before the *hāʾ*, saying *k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ* (Q. 19:1).

[4] When God says to a certain thing 'be (*kun*) this or that' and it 'is', this saying is nothing other than the form of the thing; it is spiritual, composed of powers and spirit; it has become detached from the great *kun* which God said to the All. This spiritual form is the word [that comes] from God in order that the thing may be. It is the true essence of the thing that comes into being; it is the [divine] will that it should be, and it is [God's] encompassing knowledge. Philosophers name it 'the nature of the thing', and some of them name it 'soul'; yet all assert that it is a divine command which gives form to bodies and watches over them, protecting them from all harm.

[5] Wisdom, power (*qudra*), perfecting (*itqān*) {168} and justice in their entirety, as well as all the attributes by which the Creator, exalted be He, described Himself, came to be only by means of this power (*quwwa*). They are dependent on it; by it He encompasses all beings, outer as well

as inner, and by it they were named ‘beings’. This aforementioned power has been named ‘book’ in respect of [all] created beings down to [the level of] nature; by it beings came to be.

[6] God, may His remembrance be exalted and His names sanctified, has one attribute by which He is singled out from all things: the attribute of His essence. It is borne out by His saying, may His remembrance be exalted and His names sanctified: *He did not beget and was not begotten and there is nothing comparable to Him* (Q. 112:3), as well as by His saying, may He be exalted, *There is nothing like unto Him* (Q. 42:11). The second [attribute] is that by which He has acted and brought [entities] into being; by it He has veiled Himself and was named ‘Allāh’. The first [attribute] is ‘He’; do you not see that all attributes are dependent on ‘Allāh’, while ‘Allāh’ goes back to ‘He’ (*rāji’ ilā huwa*) and ‘He’ encompasses all names and attributes?

[7] The name by which Allāh named Himself is the name by which He created creation. It is the great light and the loftiest veil; it is the superabundance; it is the hiddenness; it is the possibility; it is the Mother of the Book; it is the foundation in which all that was and all that will be inheres; it is the knowledge by which God singled Himself in the hidden, saying: *He who knows the hidden, He will not reveal His hidden to anyone* {169} *unless he be a messenger of His liking* (Q. 72:26-27). All these [primordial] decrees are within it, comprehensive and undetached. By means of *kun*, which is the saying of God, the exalted, He has detached them from the hidden.

[8] This detachment is of two kinds: [first] by speech then by act. All things by speech are spiritual entities while all things by act are bodies. The foundation of all bodies is water from which [God] brought bodies and all that followed them into existence. It is the first of the external substances. As for the spirits, all of them are within the inner, concealed body; it is the spirit which encompasses water; it is the carrier of the All. It is the place; it is the air in which the letters spread out.

[9] The foundation of the letters and the noblest among them is *alif*; following it is *wāw*, and then, at the extremity, *yā’*. *Alif* stands for the rational faculty; it shifts by the most balanced vowel, the *naṣb* [the vowel ‘a’]. It has five faculties: intellect, memory, understanding, thought and imagination; these are the sum total of its faculties.



[10] *Wāw* stands for the animalistic faculty; it shifts by the strongest and most vigorous vowel, the *rafʿ* [the vowel ‘u’]. In relation to natural bodies it resembles the nature of fire while the nature of *alif* is the nature of the sphere, for it moves neither down nor up. *Wāw* has the following faculties: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, anger and movement – seven faculties in all.

[11] *Yāʾ* stands for the natural faculty; it shifts {170} by the lowliest vowel, the *khafḍ* [the vowel ‘i’]. Its faculties are the following: absorbing<sup>55</sup>, grasping<sup>56</sup>, pushing, dividing, feeding<sup>57</sup>, shaping, and producing. These faculties are activated by that which is active within them: heat, cold, dryness, and humidity.

[12] Altogether these are twenty eight faculties; they are spiritual forms: fourteen are named ‘natural’ and fourteen ‘psychical’. When their substance is air, they are spirits and souls, and when their substance is water, they are bodies. Likewise, when a human being wishes to bring out a secret concealed within his hiddenness, he may do this either by composing letters whose substance is air, and then it becomes a saying and a speech; or, if the substance is ink, it becomes a book with physical, observable forms. In the same way that a book written by a human being indicates what the [author] says, while what he says indicates the secret which is hidden within him – so also for the Creator, exalted be He, the body of the world with all its parts is like a book: it indicates what He says, while His speech indicates what is in His hiddenness, praise be to Him: *There is no god but He, the Lord of the noble Throne* (Q. 23:116). We cannot clarify this immense secret any further, for doing so may bring about undeniable corruption.

[13] The noblest ones of all the letters are the following nine: *a-l-q-h-n-m- {171} ṭ-ṣ*.<sup>58</sup> From their light the [rest of the] letters became

<sup>55</sup> Read *nāshifa* and not *nāshiqā*; our reading differs from that of Jaʿfar, *Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, p. 369 and Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, p. 77; see also commentary.

<sup>56</sup> The text adds here *wal-mukhayyila* (the imagining) which is clearly an erroneous addition since it has already been counted among the faculties of the rational soul; as there are supposed to be seven faculties here, this one has been probably duplicated by mistake.

<sup>57</sup> Read *wal-ghādhiya* instead of *wal-ʿādiya*; our reading differs from that of Jaʿfar, *Min al-turāth al-ṣūfī*, p. 369 and Garrido, “Estudio y edición”, p. 77; see also commentary.

<sup>58</sup> In the MS, the letter ‘d’ appears in the list of nine; we have replaced it by ‘ṭ’ for two reasons: first, the existence of an alternative list at the bottom of f. 170 in which ṭ

invested with beauty and splendor. The following external bodies indicate these nine letters and their nobility: the seven heavens, the Footstool and the Throne; these are the nine bodily entities. They are the letters which God named in the Qurʾān saying: *a-l-m*, *a-l-m-ṣ*, *a-l-r*, *q*, *n*, *ḥ-m*.<sup>59</sup> They are the letters of the Pen, the Tablet, the *kun* and the *ṣ*. *A-l-m-ṣ* brings them together. Following them in rank and nobility are the letters of the [primordial] dust, the air, the atmosphere (*jaww*), the wind, the cloud, darkness, light, fire, water, clay, heaven and earth.

### Section on the *Qurʾān*

[14] The Qurʾān is the attribute, the knowledge, the remembrance, the light, the spirit; it separates between the light and the supreme spirit; it is a species (*nawʿ*), and the ninety nine names are its individuals (*ashkhāṣ*): it brings them all together. The Qurʾān goes back to them (*rājiʿ ilayhā*), I mean, to the ninety nine [names]. They are the sum total of its knowledge and the steps to paradise. The [step] that completes [the ninety nine] to a hundred is the step of proximity (*wasīla*). It is the great light, the superabundance which, in human existence, has no limit. All of them [the names] go back to fourteen combinations which are the following: *a-l-m-ṣ-r-k-h-y-ʿ-ṭ-s-ḥ-q-n*; these are the letters by which God has taken an oath.

[15] {172} As there are fourteen external lunar mansions and fourteen internal ones, so also as regards letters: there are hidden ones, the [obscure letters] of the Qurʾān, and there are external ones; these are the rest of the letters. When they are added up, they make out twenty-nine forms which correspond to the days of the month: do you not see that the moon

appears and not d; secondly, in a parallel list recorded by al-Būnī, *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā*, p. 68, the ‘d’ does not appear; however, instead of ‘d’ al-Būnī has ‘k’. We have opted for ‘ṭ’ rather than ‘k’ because it appears in the list at the bottom of the MS; see also Garrido, “El tratado de las letras”, p. 98, note 49.

<sup>59</sup> The MS has here a list of eight rather than nine letters: the letter ‘ṭ’ is missing – see previous note. Note that on the margins of folio 171 in the MS, an alternative list is written: *a-l-r k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ-ṭ-s ḥ-m q n*; cf. Garrido, “Estudio y edición,” p. 77, where this alternative list comprising of the fourteen letters of the *fawātiḥ* is preferred; see also eadem, “El tratado de las letras”, p. 99, note 50. In *Shams al-maʿārif*, p. 68, yet another list is given: *a-l-m-ṣ a-l-m-r ḥ-m k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ ṭ-s*. The list in our translation remains faithful to the notion of nine superior letters as well as to the text.

becomes complete on the fourteenth day of the month? In as much as there are fourteen lunar mansions with regard to the [moon's gradual] reception of light until it becomes complete to the extent that it resembles the sun, so also the soul; it becomes [gradually] complete and enlightened to the extent that it becomes an intellect. The soul achieves this only by means of her knowledge of the fourteen combinations to which these letters allude. All of these are contained within these three letters: *a-l-m*. Hence God said: *This book, there is no doubt about it* (Q. 2:2). And He also said: *A-l-m*,<sup>60</sup> *these are the verses of the book* (Q. 31:1-2). Understand this and ponder, for there is a lesson in it.

[16] *A-l-m, a-l-m, a-l-m-ṣ, a-l-r, a-l-r, a-l-r, a-l-m-r, a-l-r, a-l-r, k-h-y-ṣ, ṭ-h, ṭ-s-m, ṭ-s, ṭ-s-m, a-l-m, a-l-m, a-l-m, a-l-m, y-s, ṣ, ḥ-m, ḥ-m, ḥ-m-ṣ-q, ḥ-m, ḥ-m, ḥ-m, ḥ-m, q, n* – these are the twenty nine in total.

**What was transmitted in the name of Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh  
[173] al-Tustarī concerning the [divine] name in *sūra yā' sīn***

[17] He said: A man came to Ibrāhīm b. Adham and said to him: What do you say concerning *yā' sīn*? He said: It contains a [divine] name; he who learns it and invokes God by it will be answered, be he pious or libertine; that is, if he invokes [God] by it concerning the thing to which this [name] is specific.

The man said to him: And what if, may Allāh conduct you to righteousness, one invokes [God] by the whole *sūra*? He said: No, only if you invoke [God] concerning the thing by the very name which is specific to it. Consider this: suppose you went to a pharmacist's shop with an illness, knowing that there is a remedy for it there, but not knowing which [of the remedies] is the very one [for your illness]. If you take everything that is in the shop and drink it in order to be cured of your illness, will this be of benefit to you, unless you seek that very remedy and use it as required? In the same way that God created the illness He also created the effective remedy for it. Likewise, corresponding to every one of His names there is a specific thing; by that name [God] is invoked concerning the matter at hand and due to it [the invoker] is answered.

<sup>60</sup> The MS reads *a-l-r* but the context requires this alteration.

[18] The Messenger of God, may God's prayers and blessings be upon him, said: "Everything has a heart; the heart of the Qur'ān is *yā' sīn*." This [saying] and the names that are contained within [*yā' sīn*] should suffice you in terms of esteem and reverence for it, for the Prophet referred to it as the heart of the Qur'ān and the noblest organ of a living body is the heart. The power encompassing the heart is the noblest of all powers, for it vitalizes the body and is the fountain of life, breath and heat. In respect of the human body, the heart is like the sun in respect of the world, for in the sun lies the perfection of life, {174} vegetation, propagation and movement. When its light spreads upon the earth, everything on it comes to life and moves; but when its light fades, the horizon darkens and every living thing becomes still and falls asleep.

[19] These two powers of [the sun] resemble the two trumpet blows that Isrāfīl will blow [at the Resurrection]. The life of all that is on earth and in the air depends on the sun, as well as the moon's light and the sky's splendor. *Yā' sīn* contains the name which is in the sun. Anyone who reads this *sūra* and invokes [God] by it when troubled, God will release him from his trouble: the drowned will be rescued from drowning; the prisoner will be freed from prison; the hungry will become sated; the thirst of the thirsty will be quenched; the fearful will become secure; for the dead, the punishment of the tomb will be made easy. All this is due to the loftiness and nobility of the name which inheres in [*yā' sīn*].

The book has been completed by the grace of God, the exalted. May God's prayers and blessings be upon our master Muḥammad and upon his family and companions.

#### COMMENTARY

[1] "Concerning letters, Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh said: God in His wisdom made the letters the foundation from which speech may be constructed": From the text it is not clear where exactly Sahl's statement ends (see also Introduction, section I). One could observe the start of another person's discussion either in the words "this is because speech breaks up into many parts" [1] or in the words "the difference between the speech of human beings and the speech of God, may He be exalted, is this..." [2]. The latter option may be supported by the citation of

Sahl in Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* (*Book on the Properties of Letters*), f. 135 (on Ibn Masarra see Introduction, section III): "Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī said that the letters are the [primordial] dust; they are the foundation of things at the beginning, when things were being created."

**"God in His wisdom made the letters the foundation from which speech (*al-qawl*) may be constructed"**: Our text uses two terms to denote the act of speaking, be it divine or human: *qawl* and *kalām*. Thus, in this opening statement ascribed to Sahl al-Tustarī, "speech" is referred to as *qawl*, whereas in the next paragraph the term used is *kalām*. It is hard to establish in this epistle a clear semantic difference between these two terms; they seem, more or less, synonymous (see, for example, [12] where the two terms, *qawl wa-kalām*, are joined twice: first in relation to human speech and then in relation to God's speech). One should bear in mind, however, the deep-rooted and far-reaching theological connotations associated with both these terms: The Qurʾān is identified as *kalām allāh* (God's speech), and *kalima* (word), from the same root, often designates the divine fiat *kun* (Be!) and the divine command (*amr*). As for *qawl*, it is associated with the divine utterances manifested as Qurʾānic verses as well as the creative *kun*.

**"Speech (*al-qawl*) breaks up into many parts; each of these parts breaks up into named entities; named entities break up into letters, and letters break up into the [primordial] dust"**: It is ambiguous whether the speech referred to here is divine speech, human speech or both. It is noteworthy that while our epistle discusses the distinction between divine speech and human speech (see, for example, [2] and commentary), it seems to focus mainly on the correspondences and analogies between the two – on this see commentary to [8] and [12] below.

**"Named entities"**: The term *musammayāt* (named entities) and its derivatives (*ism*, *tasmiya* etc.) appear in various mystical and philosophical sources where the nexus of language and reality is discussed; see, for example, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *ʿIlm al-awliyāʾ* p. 113 and other works by al-Tirmidhī, in Sviri, "Words of Power", pp. 214-215; Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 1, pp. 394-401; al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-zīna*, vol. 2, pp. 9-11; Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-kashf*, pp. 90-92; also Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 250, 258-262. Note that according to our text, the entities themselves, rather than their names, are made of letters; hence letters are not simply signifiers but constitute the very substance of existing things. Such a discourse is not typical of the "Tustarī tradition" reflected in many Sūfī sources; on this, see also Introduction.

**"The [primordial] dust"**: For a detailed discussion of the term *habāʾ* (primordial dust) and its cosmogonic significance, see Introduction. Here it is sufficient to say that although this cosmogonic aspect is ascribed to Sahl by medieval as well as modern scholars, no suggestion for it can be found in the "Tustarī tradition". For the latter, see Introduction.

[1] and [3] **“They are the foundations of [all] things”**: Cf. Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 135, 141, 153; according to Ibn Masarra, the letters are identical with the primordial dust and as such are the foundation of all things (in f. 135, he ascribes this theory overtly to Sahl). However, in our text, although the letters are indeed the foundation of all things, they are not precisely identical with the primordial dust; rather they are said to “break up into the [primordial] dust” (and see also [3] where the letters are equated with *kun*, which is the power that “encompasses the primordial dust”). This discrepancy may indicate that the two works (*Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* and our unnamed epistle) represent two versions of a cosmogonic scheme based upon an apocryphal Tustarī tradition; see also below, commentary to [3]; see also Introduction.

[2] **“The difference between the speech of human beings and the speech of God, may He be exalted, is this: human beings’ speech is laid down by agreement and convention (*mawḍū’ bi-ittifāq wa-iṣṭilāḥ*)”**: The terms *waḍ’*, *ittifāq* and *iṣṭilāḥ* in discussions concerning the nature of human language occur also in the Jābirian corpus; see, for example, *K. al-khamsīn*, apud Kraus, Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, 1942, p. 256, note 4; for Muslim theological sources concerning this discussion, see *ibid*, note 3. Note, however, that the distinction proposed here between divine speech and human speech is not universally endorsed; for example, it does not appear in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*. On the contrary, Ibn Masarra seems to emphasize the resemblance between the two; see, for example, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 153–154. Similarly, for al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, human language is inherently God-given not human-made and, therefore, the knowledge of language and its components constitutes the highest mystical knowledge (*al-ḥikma al-‘ulyā*) of the friends of God, *al-awliyā’*. According to al-Tirmidhī, existent things (*ashyā’*) come into being together with their names (*asmā’*); hence, the knowledge of the true “meaning” (*ma’nā*) of a name amounts to the knowledge of the essence of the named thing (*al-musammā*) – on this, see Sviri, “Words of Power”, especially pp. 210–213 and the primary sources mentioned there. Ibn al-‘Arabī takes the relationship between divine speech and human speech even farther: for him each and every name, in any of the human languages (which, from one perspective, exemplify convention and construction), signifies, in the last resort, a divine name; each and every “named thing” in existence (*al-musammā*, *al-mukawwan*) signifies one of the infinite names that emanate from God’s speech (*kalām allāh*). For Ibn al-‘Arabī, too, the knowledge of the inner meaning of names and language is esoteric and reserved only for “the people of unveiling” (*ahl al-kashf*); the latter refrain from elaborating on it out of deference for God – see, for example, *al-Futūḥāt*, ch. 297, vol. 4, pp. 589–590. Note that in our text, too, an analogy is drawn between divine speech and human speech – see below, commentary to [8] and [12]. For the whole topic, see also Weiss, “*Waḍ’ al-luḡa*”, *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, vol. 4, p. 684.

**“Firm entities”** (*a’yān qā’ima*): The expression *a’yān qā’ima* designates God’s everlasting speech as distinct from human speech, which is characterized by temporality. God’s speech as “firm entities” signifies His will and the objects of His knowledge, which are the shining manifestations of his Hiddenness. The term brings to mind the concept of *a’yān thābita* (“immutable entities”), central to the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the *a’yān thābita* are the objects of God’s knowledge which become manifested by means of God’s speech; see, for example, Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 449, Index, s.v. “entity”; see also Garrido, “El Tratado de las letras”, p. 92, note 10.

**[3] “The power that detaches them (*wal-quwwa al-mufaṣṣila laḥā*) is ‘Be!’ (*kun*)”**: For the creative divine fiat *kun*, see, for example, Q. 16:40: “When We will something, all We say to it is ‘be!’ and it is”; see also Q. 2:117, 3:47, 3:59, 6:73, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68. For a discussion on this divine imperative, see Sviri, “KUN – The existence-Bestowing Word in Islamic Mysticism”. In the cosmogonic scheme outlined here, the creative word is conceived of as an intermediate energy (*quwwa*) situated between the divine Hiddenness (*al-ghayb*) and God’s manifested speech (*kalām*); i.e., it is the energy that detaches God’s will and knowledge from His Hiddenness. Our author identifies this primordial energy with the letters, which, according to him, are “the foundation of [all] things” (see also above, commentary to [1] and [3]). *Kun* and the letters are seen as encompassing the primordial dust (*ḥabā’*) and as being carried by air (*hawā’*). For the conception of air as the place in which the creative letters operate, see below commentary to [8]: “it is the air in which the letters spread out”.

**“The uncompounded spiritual power (*al-quwwa al-rūḥāniyya al-mufrada*)”**: The concept of letters as constituting the most basic particles of existent entities appears also in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*. According to Ibn Masarra, too, the primordial letters form the spiritual foundation for all created things. He says: “These are the letters that God spoke before creation, from which the inner things were composed (*wa-minḥā ta’allafat al-umūr al-bāṭina*). These [inner things] are uncompounded spiritual powers (*qiwā mufrada nafsāniyya*)”, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 153. Note that the terms *rūḥānī*, *nafsānī* and *bāṭin* are used here as part of a cosmogonic and cosmological scheme and not as part of a psychological-mystical discourse as often found in Ṣūfī literature.

**“This is why the Mightiest of sayers placed the *kāf* before the *hā’*, saying *k-h-y-‘-ṣ* (Q. 19:1)”**: For an identical cosmogonic understanding of the order of the letters *kāf* and *hā’* as alluded to in the Qur’ānic cluster *k-h-y-‘-ṣ*, see Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 153. Note, however, that, compared with the elaborate discussion of Ibn Masarra, our epistle addresses the hermeneutics of *k-h-y-‘-ṣ* only succinctly. The fact that these hermeneutic elaborations are mentioned here only referentially, suggests to us that our author assumes a shared-knowledge



in their regard (see section VI in the Introduction). Such an assumption points to a time of writing which may be later than Ibn Masarra's rather than earlier.

[4] **“When God says to a certain thing ‘be (*kun*) this or that’ and it ‘is’, this saying is nothing other than the form of the thing”**: For the identification of *kun* with the form (*ṣūra*) of a thing, see also Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 154: “In *kun* inheres the being (*kiyān*) of every thing, its form and its model (*mithāl*).” On the concept of “form” in medieval philosophical phraseology and its Aristotelian and neoplatonic background, see, for example, *EI*<sup>2</sup>, “Hayūlā”, vol. 3, pp. 328-330 (L. Gardet); McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, p. 16 (al-Kindī, “On the Intellect”), p. 71 (al-Fārābī), p. 157 (Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ*), p. 280 (Ibn Bājja, *Fī ittiṣāl al-ʿaql bil-insān*) et passim; D’Ancona, “Greek into Arabic”, pp. 11-12, 25-26; Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, pp. 19-25, 44-46. Note that in our epistle this philosophical understanding is combined with the mythical dimension associated with the Qurʾānic *kun*. A similar combination can be found in Ismāʿīlī sources – see, for example, al-Rāzī, *Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 38-39. According to al-Rāzī, *kun* is the “form” of God’s word (*kalima*) from which the world is created. For God’s divine word as a creative hypostasis in Ismāʿīlī thought, see also Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, p. 174 and the references given there.

**“The Great *kun* which God said to the All”**: The expression *al-kun al-aʿzam* is unusual and we could not find parallels to it. This expression implies a two-tier creative process, both tiers engendered by the divine command: the one, which is primary, singular and precedes differentiated creation, is called here *al-kun al-aʿzam*; the other, the ensuing and perpetual *kun*, is the command that brings every thing into existence. Such a cosmological and cosmogonic understanding of *kun* is characteristic of an intellectual milieu of which our epistle seems to be part and parcel; this milieu incorporates Ibn Masarra, Ismāʿīlī sources including Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, and Ibn al-ʿArabī (see above, commentary to [3]). Note that in his *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, Ibn Masarra uses the expression *al-nūr al-aʿzam* (the Great Light) in a similar cosmological-cosmogonic context; see ff. 162, 165. According to Ibn Masarra, the “great light” is identified with the Hiddenness from which all created things proceed by means of the primary divine *kun*. One should bear in mind, however, that our epistle lacks the neoplatonic structure employed extensively by Ibn Masarra.

For *al-kull* in the sense of universal and undifferentiated Existence, see Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 144, 148, 149, 161, 165. For *al-kull* in Arabic philosophical literature, see, for example, al-Kindī, *Rasāʾil al-kindī al-falsafīyya*, vol. 1, p. 260; Alon, *Al-Fārābī’s Philosophical Lexicon*, vol. 1, pp. 408-409; also Goichon, *Lexique de la langue philosophique d’Ibn Sīnā*, Index, s.v. *kull*, p. 349. For *al-kull* in Ismāʿīlī sources, see, for example, Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ, *al-Jāmiʿa*, vol. 1, p. 575 (cf. Tāmīr’s edition, p. 144); al-Kirmānī, *Raḥat al-ʿaql*, pp. 152-153,



162, 298. In the last decades, the pursuit of the usage/s and meaning/s of this term in medieval Jewish neoplatonic texts has produced an ongoing and lively scholarly exchange: see, for example, Kreisel, “On the term *KOL* in Abraham ibn Ezra”, pp. 29-66; E. R. Wolfson, “God, The Demiurge and the Intellect”; Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol’s Use of the *Sefer Yešira*.” Both Wolfson and Liebes highlight the neoplatonic origins of the term and its usages. For Ibn Gabirol’s use of this term see also Schlanger, “Sur le rôle du ‘Tôut’ dans la création selon Ibn Gabirol”. Despite the fact that similar questions could have been raised with regard to Islamic sources, we could not find a scholarly discussion pertaining to the use of *al-kull* in medieval Islamic philosophy. For *al-kull*, see also below commentary to [8]. Cf. *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, p. 103: *ḥalak al-kull*.

**Philosophers name it ‘the nature of the thing’ (*ṭabīʿat al-shayʿ*):** For the use of the term “the nature of the thing” in philosophic literature, see, for example, Ibn Sīnā, *al-samāʿ al-ṭabīʿī*, pp. 102-103 (*Fī nisbat al-ṭabīʿa ilā al-mādda*): “...*wa-rubḥamā kānat ṭabīʿat al-shayʿ hiya bi-ʿaynihā šuratuḥu...*”. This is a most unlikely term to have come from Sahl al-Tustarī’s pen.

**“All assert that it is a divine command (*amr ilāhī*) which gives form to bodies”:** The term “divine command” plays a significant role in Shīʿite and especially Ismāʿīlī sources – see Pines, “Shīʿite Terms and Conceptions”, pp. 172-178, 224-228; Krinis, *The Idea of the Chosen People*, pp. 164-207 (in Hebrew). In this paragraph it stands in a series of terms, all of which are equated with one another, in an attempt to define the divine command *kun*. This series runs as follows: *kun* = *šūra* = *kalīma* = *ḥaqīqa* = *irāda* = *al-ʿilm al-muḥīt* = *ṭabīʿa* = *naḥs* = *amr ilāhī*. Evidently, our author makes here an attempt to harmonize and blend Qurʾānic, mythical and philosophical conceptions, all related to letter speculations and the divine *kun*. For a similar line of equations cited from the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle*, see Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, p. 154.

**“[It] watches over them, protecting them from all harm”:** The idea that the “form” protects the existent is typically neoplatonic; a similar idea is found in the Ikhwān’s *al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa*, see vol. 2, p. 324-325: *wal-šūra hiya al-ḥāfiẓa lil-mawādd*. It is noteworthy that the Ikhwān, similarly to our text, trace the origin of the “form” which protects physical bodies to the divine *kun*.

**[5] “Wisdom, power (*qudra*), perfecting (*itqān*) and justice in their entirety, as well as all the attributes by which the Creator, exalted be He, described Himself, came to be only by means of this power (*quwwa*)”:** The idea according to which the divine attributes “came to be” only through the creative *kun* is both radical and unique; it stands in contrast to prevailing theological conceptions in Islam. It is absent also from the other sources which form the comparative framework of this paper. A similar idea, however, can be found in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought,

where the manifestation of the divine names and attributes is perceived as dependent upon the creative process stemming from *kun* – see, for example, Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 127-132; note especially the role of *kun* in Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmogonic myth of divine names, see *Kitāb 'anqā' mughrīb*, p. 36; on this myth see Elmore, "Four Texts of Ibn al-ʿArabī on the Creative Self-Manifestation of the Divine Names".

**"They are dependent on it (*wa-bihā ta'allaqat*)"**: the term *ta'alluq* and its derivatives play an important role in Ibn al-ʿArabī's myth of names. In this myth, *ta'alluq* seems at times to signify the relationship between the divine attributes and their created objects, and at times the connection between these attributes and their creative functions – see, for example, Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Inshā' al-dawā'ir*, p. 38; see also *Kitāb 'anqā' mughrīb*, p. 36. On this term, see also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 48; Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, p. 348 n. 26.

**"This aforementioned power has been named 'book' in respect of [all] created beings down to [the level of] nature"**: For the image of creation as a divine book, see also below [12]. This image can be found in Ibn Masarra, *Risālat al-i'tibār (Epistle on Contemplation)*, f. 175; in the Ikhwān, for example, *Rasā'il*, vol. 4, p. 203; also in Ibn al-ʿArabī, see, for example, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 5, vol. 1, p. 291. For a reference by Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) to this image of Ibn Masarra, see Gril, "L'interprétation par transposition symbolique (*i'tibār*), selon Ibn Barrajān et Ibn ʿArabī," p. 153. For Ibn Masarra's use of this image, see Stroumsa and Sviri, "The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus", pp. 217, 227.

[6] **"God... has one attribute by which He is singled out from all things (*ṣifa infarada bihā*): the attribute of His essence (*ṣifat dhātihī*)... The second [attribute] is that by which He has acted and brought [entities] into being; by it He has veiled Himself and was named 'Allāh'. The first [attribute] is 'He'... 'He' encompasses all names and attributes"**: Presenting *huwa*, the third person singular pronoun, as a divine name or attribute seems a rather unique feature of this epistle. An unusual distinction is also made here between the name *allāh* and the 'name' *huwa*. The distinction between "essence" (*dhāt*) and "attributes" (*ṣifāt*) is a topic widely discussed and disputed by Muslim philosophers and theologians – see, for example, *EP*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 2, p. 220 (F. Rahman), *EP*<sup>3</sup> online (C. Gilliot) and *Enc. of the Qur'an*, "God and His Attributes", vol. 2, p. 316 (G. Böwering). In contrast, it is hard to find in Islamic theological and philosophical writings references to the name *allāh* in relation to the divine name *huwa*; moreover, references to the hierarchy of the divine names where *huwa* occupies the first rank and *allāh* the second are rare. However, Ibn Masarra does make a similar distinction between *huwa* and *allāh*, where *huwa* designates the

divine essence and *allāh* is assigned the second rank in the hierarchy of names. According to Ibn Masarra, *huwa* signifies God's essence by virtue of its being the most approximate signification of the unknowable God: "... [it] cannot be made explicit by anything other than 'He'". Next in the hierarchy of names Ibn Masarra lists "the name by which God named Himself", i.e., the name "*allāh*". This name Ibn Masarra describes as "the first veil and the concealed hiddenness" (*al-ḥijāb al-awwal wal-ghayb al-maknūn*) – see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 143-145 (on the concept of the veil, see Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 138-139). Following the name *allāh* in Ibn Masarra's list comes what he calls "the immutable name" (*al-ism al-thābit*) which he identifies with the "greater soul" (*al-naḥs al-kubrā*), i.e., the neoplatonic universal soul. By implication, therefore, the name *allāh*, the second ranking name, is identified by Ibn Masarra with the universal intellect – see also *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 146-151. A hierarchical system in which the name *allāh* veils the hidden and unknowable God can be found also in Ismā'īlī writings from the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the early Ismā'īlī *kūnī-qadar* myth, '*allāh*' is the name of *kūnī*, which is the first hypostasis beneath the hidden God. In Ismā'īlī neoplatonic philosophy, the universal intellect (or the first intellect) became identified with *kūnī* and, by the same token, also with the name *allāh*. As in our text, according to which the name *allāh* veils the divine essence, so too in Ismā'īlī thought, *kūnī*/universal intellect/*allāh* were perceived as a veil hiding the unknowable God – on this see, for example, Stern, "The Earliest Cosmological Doctrines", pp. 7, 10-12; al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-ʿaql*, pp. 64, 87-88; idem, *al-Risāla al-muḍīʿa*, pp. 56-57; al-Ḥāmidī, *Kanz al-walad*, pp. 44, 68, 79, 98, 157; see also Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ (?), *Jāmiʿat al-jāmiʿa*, p. 338.

In comparative terms, the hierarchical scheme highlighting the distinction between the divine names *huwa* and *allāh* points to clear similarities between our epistle and Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*. This distinction is also close to Ismā'īlī conceptions. However, it is noteworthy that, in contradistinction to both Ibn Masarra and the Ismā'īlī writings, our epistle lacks any explicit neoplatonic orientations. At any rate, the theosophy of divine names in our epistle can by no means be associated with the "Tustarī tradition". Note, that a similar understanding of "*huwa*" as designating the unknowable God is expressed by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī – see *al-Masāʾil al-maknūna*, p. 85.

Note that in Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophical system, God's He-ness (*al-huwa*, *al-huwiyya*) is particularly important – see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, Index, s. v. "He-ness", p. 466.

[7] "The name by which Allāh named Himself is the name by which He created creation. It is the great light and the loftiest veil; it is the superabundance; it is the hiddenness; it is the possibility; it is the Mother of the Book; it is the foundation in which all that was and all that will be inheres; it is the knowledge by which God singled Himself in the hidden": The list of equated terms produced here is an attempt to chart aspects within God before He

brings out creation by the act of *kun*. The scheme that emerges thus far is as follows: Above the name *allāh* and all the other divine aspects stands *huwa*; below *allāh* comes the differentiating *kun* which brings out all existents into the open (cf. also above, commentary to [4]). The list of aspects inhering in the name *allāh* comprises mostly of traditional Islamic concepts. These concepts are: light (*nūr*), veil (*ḥijāb*), superabundance (*mazīd*), the hiddenness (*ghayb*), the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*), the foundation (*aṣl*) and knowledge (*ʿilm*). Among these terms, which have a strong mythical tenor, only ‘possibility’ (*imkān*) can be identified as philosophical. For *imkān* in the philosophical context, see, for example, McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, Index, p. 426; also Daiber, *Bibliography*, p. 317.

The term *al-nūr al-aʿẓam*, “the great light”, appears also in Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 162, 164-165. Ibn Masarra places the “great light” above the universal intellect and, like our author, equates it with the hiddenness (*al-ghayb*). The universal intellect, as mentioned above in commentary to [6], is identified by Ibn Masarra with the name *allāh*. Thus, two distinctions can be observed here between our epistle and Ibn Masarra’s: First, while Ibn Masarra distinguishes between the great light and the name *allāh* (the universal intellect), our author identifies one with the other; secondly, our author does not show any interest in the neoplatonic scheme as does Ibn Masarra.

For the concept of the veil (*al-ḥijāb*), see above commentary to [6].

The term *al-mazīd* (“superabundance”) appears in the Qurʾān (50:35), where it signifies the unceasing abundance bestowed upon the righteous in paradise. This term, as well as other derivatives of the root *z-y-d* (to increase, to give in superabundance), became significant in Ṣūfī terminology as denoting the superabundance of divine favours bestowed upon the elect and associated especially with the latter’s act of gratitude (*shukr*). The linkage of gratitude and *mazīd* is based on Q. 14:7; on this see, for example, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, p. 19 (*aṣl* 10) and p. 280 (*aṣl* 235); see also Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, p. 52 (commentary on 14:7); also al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 81, ch. 24: “*fī dhikr māhiyyat al-wird lil-murīd wa-waṣf ḥāl al-ʿarif bil-mazīd*”; also *ʿIlm al-qulūb*, ascribed to al-Makkī, p. 17. On abundance in mystical states (*al-ziyāda fī talwīn al-wāridāt*), see al-Sarrāj, *kitāb al-lumaʿ*, p. 366. For the category of specific sciences of abundance labeled *ʿulūm al-mazīd*, see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, vol. 5, p. 281 (end of ch. 337). Vis-à-vis these sources, where the term is attested to mainly in moral, psychological and eschatological contexts, the appearance of *al-mazīd* in our text is noteworthy: its inclusion in the above list of primordial divine aspects suggests that this term may have retained also a rarer mythical, hypostatic aspect. Such an aspect may be gleaned from the following passage by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī: ... *wa-yataraqqā fī darajāt al-mazīd* – see *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, p. 423 (*aṣl* 289); see also Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, vol. 2, p. 260: ... *wa-yahjubunī bi-ladhdhāt al-mazīd*... For a similarly uncommon use of *al-mazīd*, see also below [14].

For the ‘Mother of the Book’ (*umm al-kitāb*) and its occurrences in the Qurʾān, the Ḥadīth as well as in Shīʿite sources, see *EP*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 10, p. 854-855 (E. Geoffroy and F. Daftary).

**“All these [primordial] decrees (*maqādīr*) are within it, comprehensive (*mujmala*) and undetached (*ghayr mufaṣṣala*). By means of *kun*, which is the saying of God, the exalted, He has detached them from the hidden”**: For the idea that *kun* detaches all things-to-be from their hiddenness, see [3] above. At the level of “*allāh*”, the primordial decrees are undifferentiated. This, again, highlights the *kun* as the differentiating divine act which proceeds from this level of the name *allāh*. Accordingly, the Arabic term *ghayr mufaṣṣal*, “undetached”, should be also understood here as “undifferentiated”. For the term *jamiʿ al-maqādīr* (“all the decrees”), see Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 146. For the concept of a pre-creational phase in which all that will take place is contained in an undifferentiated form within a primordial book (*umm al-kitāb*), see Ibn Masarra, for example, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 151-152.

[8] and [12] **“This detachment is of two kinds: [first] by speech then by act. All things by speech are spiritual entities while all things by act are bodies”; “Altogether these are twenty eight faculties; they are spiritual forms: fourteen are named ‘natural’ and fourteen ‘psychical’. When their substance is air, they are spirits and souls, and when their substance is water, they are bodies”**: In [8], our author explains that the differentiating *kun* results in two creative modes: a spiritual inner one (*bāṭin*) and a physical external one (*ẓāhir*). The spiritual mode pertains to God’s speech (*qawl*), its substance is air (*hawāʾ*) and it produces spirits and souls (*arwāḥ wa-anfus*). The physical mode pertains to God’s action (*fiʿl*), its substance is water (*māʾ*) and it produces bodies (*ajsām*). After a digression (in [9]-[11]) into a discussion of the letters *a-w-y* and their corresponding faculties, our author takes up again in [12] his discussion of God’s two different modes of creation. These two different modes, according to [12], correspond to the two groups within the twenty-eight “faculties” (*qiwā*), which, although the author does not say it explicitly, can be identified with the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. Fourteen of these “faculties” are named “psychical” (*nafsāniyya*) while the other fourteen are named “natural” (*ṭabīʿiyya*). The twenty-eight faculties (namely letters), therefore, constitute the foundation of all created beings, be they physical or spiritual. In themselves, the twenty-eight faculties/letters are “spiritual forms” (*ṣuwar rūḥāniyya*), for they emanate from the divine *kun*, which, as we have seen in [4] above, is “the true essence of the thing that comes into being... the nature of the thing”. This dualistic scheme of creation by letters is highlighted by the analogy the author draws in [12] between the human and the divine act of verbal expression. Human verbal expression can manifest either as speech, whose substance is air, or as a book (*kitāb*), whose substance is ink (*midād*). By implication, God’s expression also manifests

either as speech, whose substance is air, or as action, whose substance is water. For the difference between divine speech and human speech, however, see commentary to [2] above.

**“The foundation of all bodies is water from which [God] brought bodies and all that followed them into existence. It is the first of the external substances (*awwal al-jawāhir al-ẓāhira*)”:** For water as the source of all created beings in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, see sūras 11:7, 21:30, 24:45, 25:54; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 8, p. 269 (no. 8278); vol. 12, p. 481 (no. 16132); al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1, pp. 256-257; also Rubin, “Pre-Existence and Light”, p. 115, note 23. Note that in the Ismāʿīlī *Kūnī-Qadar* myth, air and water are perceived as the first created substances and are identified with the Throne and the Footstool respectively – see Stern, “Earliest Cosmological Doctrines”, p. 9. In another Ismāʿīlī cosmogonic myth, the encompassing (*muḥīt*) air is portrayed as the first created substance emerging from the divine creative words/letters. From these words/letters also other substances emerged, among which was water – see Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *al-ʿĀlim al-ghulām*, pp. 14-15, 25.

**“As for the spirits, all of them are within the inner (*al-bāṭin*), concealed body; it is the spirit which encompasses water; it is the carrier of the All. It is the place; it is the air in which the letters spread out”:** For the association of air, spirit, creative letters and “place” (*makān*) as elements encompassing and carrying the body of the world, see Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 154, 161. For the expression “the All” (*al-kull*), see above commentary to [4].

**“It is the spirit which encompasses water”:** this idea is similar to the above mentioned Ismāʿīlī notion of ‘encompassing air’ – see above.

**“It is the air in which the letters spread out”:** see also [3] above: “Air carries the letters”.

[9] **“Alif stands for the rational faculty...”:** For the analogy of *alif* with the human, rational form, cf. Ikhwān, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 3, pp. 144-145. In our epistle this analogy is borne out by the phonetic characteristic of *alif*: “the most balanced vowel, the *naṣb* [the vowel ‘a’]”. The Ikhwān, on their part, emphasize the graphic form of *alif*, namely, a straight line (*al-khaṭṭ al-mustaqīm*), which signifies the upright form of the human being (*muntaṣib al-qāma*); for the latter image and expression, see also idem, *al-Jāmiʿa*, vol. 1, pp. 241, 358. The phonetic aspect of *alif* as well as the graphic one in analogy with the human, rational soul, are both presented by Ibn Masarra, see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 140-141. Note especially the almost identical phrasing in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 140: “Alif is the rational soul.” As for the phonetic aspect, note Ibn Masarra’s use of the expression *makhraj al-ʿadl* (“the balanced articulation point”); as for the graphic aspect, note his expression *muntaṣib*

*al-qāma*. The reference to the graphic form of *alif* as upright (*ḥarf muntaṣib*) appears also in *Ghawr al-umūr*, a text attributed to the 9<sup>th</sup>-century mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, see p. 75. However, al-Tirmidhī's concern is with the divine oneness and uniqueness rather than with the human constitution. For the textual-historical significance of these similarities, see Introduction.

For an interesting discussion on the letters a–h–w–y, cf. Judah Ha-Levi, *Kitāb al-radd wal-dalīl* (= *al-Kitāb al-khazarī*), p. 150 (trans. into English by H. Hirschfeld (*The Book of Kuzari*, p. 202); see also Stroumsa, "Ibn Masarra and the Beginnings of Mystical Thought in al-Andalus", p. 108, note 68.

**"Intellect (*ʿaql*), memory (*dhikr*), understanding (*fahm*), thought (*fikr*) and imagination (*takhyīl*)"**: To these five cognitive faculties, cf. Ikhwān al-ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, vol. 1, p. 103; vol. 2, pp. 390, 414–415; vol. 3, pp. 241–242, 404; idem, *al-Jāmi'a*, vol. 1, pp. 507–508, 602–603, 605–606. The Ikhwān enumerate five "spiritual" faculties (*qiwā rūḥāniyya*): the imaginative (*al-mutakhayyila*), the thinking (*al-mufakkira*), the retaining (*al-ḥāfiẓa*), the speaking (*al-nāṭiqā*) and the productive (*al-ṣāni'a*, i.e., the one that produces writing). Memory, understanding, thought and imagination of our epistle correspond to the Ikhwān's retaining, thinking and imaginative faculties respectively. An explicit reference to intellect and memory may be found in another list of the Ikhwān, where seven faculties of the universal soul, which, according to the Ikhwān, is analogous to the human soul, are enumerated: the intellectual (*ʿāqila*), the retaining, the remembering (*dhākira*), the imaginative, the thinking (*mufakkira/mutafakkira*), the speaking, and the knowing (*ʿālima/allāma*) – see *al-jāmi'a*, vol. 2, p. 29. It is noteworthy that two faculties central to the Ikhwān's teaching – the speaking and the productive – are not mentioned in our epistle. However, the author of our epistle employs the term *al-quwwa al-nāṭiqā* in the sense of *al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā*, the rational soul. This 'soul' is symbolized by *alif* and comprises of the five faculties enumerated above. See also below, commentary [10].

Note the list of five cognitive faculties produced by Ibn al-ʿArabī: *al-hissiyya*, *al-khayālīyya*, *al-mufakkira*, *al-ʿaqliyya*, and *al-dhākira* – see *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 3, vol. 3, p. 277. For a wide comparative study of this topic, see Black, "Psychology"; H. A. Wolfson, "The Internal Senses".

**[10] "Wāw stands for the animalistic faculty; it shifts by the strongest and most vigorous vowel, the *rafʿ* [the vowel 'u']"**: As with the letter *alif* [9], the author has here, too, phonetics in mind: in relating *wāw* to the animalistic faculty, our text describes both as exemplifying strength and vigor. It does not deal with other aspects of the letter *wāw*. Ibn Masarra, on the other hand, highlights both the phonetic and the graphic aspects of *wāw*. Concerning the graphic, he says: "That which possesses an animalistic soul only, kneels down like *wāw*"; as for the phonetic, he adds: "you will find that it is among the first articulation points, next to the throat" – *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 140–141.



**“...for it moves neither down nor up (*idh laysat khafḍan wa-lā rafʿan*)”**: The terms *khafḍ* and *rafʿ*, signify both the vowels ‘i’ and ‘u’ and the directions down and up respectively.

**“In relation to natural bodies it resembles the nature of fire while the nature of *alif* is the nature of the sphere”**: while *alif* corresponds to “the nature of the sphere (*al-falak*)”, *wāw* is said to correspond to “the nature of fire”, presumably due to its natural upward movement. Significantly, one should note that in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s chapter on letters in *al-Futūḥāt*, *alif* is referred to as the sphere (*falak*) from which all other letters emanate – see ch. 2, vol. 1, p. 210.

**“*Wāw* has the following faculties: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, anger and movement – seven faculties in all”**: It is noteworthy that, in addition to the five external senses, the list comprises also of two more faculties: anger and movement. There seems to be a conflation here of the Aristotelian taxonomy of three souls (rational, animalistic-sensitive, vegetative-growing) with the Platonic one (the rational, angry and appetitive). Such a conflation can be attested already in the *Theology of Aristotle*, the main neoplatonic work in Arabic which dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, see Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, pp. 59-61; Black, “Psychology”, pp. 308-309. Linking anger with the animalistic soul is typical also of *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*, where, in addition to anger, the animalistic soul is characterized by movement and sensory ability (*ḥiss*) – see vol. 1, pp. 313-314, vol. 2, pp. 180, 410; idem, *al-Jāmiʿa*, vol. 2, p. 164; cf. also the list of “seven spiritual faculties” (*qiwā rūḥāniyya*), in *Gḥāyat al-ḥakīm*, p. 46: the two faculties which are added there to the ‘sensory’ five are the speaking (*nāṭiqā*) and the understanding (*ʿāqila*) – this is compatible with the Ikhwān, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 4, pp. 232-233 and *al-Jāmiʿa*, vol. 1, pp. 585-588.

[11] **“*Yāʾ* stands for the natural faculty; it shifts by the lowliest vowel, the *khafḍ* [the vowel ‘i’]”**: Here too, our text’s concern is with the phonetic characteristics of *yāʾ* in its correspondence with the vegetative-growing soul, identified as “the natural faculty”. It does not deal with the letter’s graphic aspect. Ibn Masarra, true to his method (see above [9]-[10]), deals with both the phonetic and the graphic aspects of this letter. As for the Ikhwān, in their discussion of the three souls (the rational, the animalistic-sensitive and the vegetative-growing), although they do not refer to *wāw* and *yāʾ* explicitly, they do refer to the graphic aspect of *alif* and its correspondence to the human rational form. Thus the context in which they make these references is similar to that of Ibn Masarra’s and our epistle.

**“Its faculties are the following: absorbing (*nāshifa*), grasping (*māsika*), pushing (*dāfiʿa*), dividing (*qāsima*), feeding (*ghādhiya*), shaping (*muṣawwira*), and producing (*muwallida*)”**: Compared with similar lists in the mystical-philosophical tradition, the text as we have it is clearly flawed. In the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān,



for example, the following seven faculties are enumerated: *jādhība* (attracting), *māsika*, *hādīma* (digesting), *dāfi'a*, *nāmiya* (growing), *ghādhiya* and *muṣawwira* – see vol. 2, pp. 157-158, 382, 390-391; vol. 3, pp. 193-194. The “absorbing faculty” of our text corresponds to the Ikhwān’s “attracting faculty”; cf. *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, pp. 45-46, where a similar list is found. According to Kraus (*Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, p. 285), the term *nāshifa* is an archaic form equivalent to *jādhība* and is found, for example, in *Sirr al-khalīqa* attributed to Appolonius of Tyana. The faculty which is named here “the dividing” (*qāsima*) seems to be equivalent to the Ikhwān’s *al-ghādhiya*, which they describe as responsible for attaching the nutritious substances to their appropriate organs. As for the *ghādhiya* of our text, this may be a scribe’s corruption of *al-hādīma*, “the digesting faculty”. Finally, “the shaping” and “producing” faculties of our text seem to be represented in the Ikhwān’s list by one faculty only, “the shaping faculty”, i.e., the faculty responsible for regenerating parts within the organism. Note that Ibn al-ʿArabī has produced a list of faculties which is almost identical with that of the Ikhwān – see *al-Futūḥāt*, ch. 7, vol. 1, pp. 331-332; cf. *ibid.*, ch. 353, vol. 5, pp. 453-454; cf. *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, p. 45; on this see also Affīfī, *The Mystical Philosophy*, p. 121 and note 1.

[12] For a discussion of this paragraph, see also above, commentary to [8].

**“Altogether these are twenty eight faculties”:** One may perceive here a connection between the four natures/qualities mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph and the twenty-eight faculties mentioned here, which are analogous to the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet (on this analogy, see also below). The number twenty eight derives, possibly, from multiplying the four natures/qualities with the seven vegetative-growing faculties. Such a conception is indeed characteristic of the Jābirian corpus, in which letters correspond to the four qualities: heat, cold, dryness, and humidity; words comprise of letters just as existent things comprise of the four qualities. Therefore, the letters indicate the structure of all things. This Jābirian theme is taken up extensively by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the second chapter of the *Futūḥāt*, a chapter dedicated to letters; on Jābir, see Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 187-270 and Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, pp. 130-150; on Jābir and Ibn al-ʿArabī, see Gril, “The Science of Letters”, pp. 128-230.

**“Altogether these are twenty eight faculties; they are spiritual forms: fourteen are named ‘natural’ and fourteen ‘psychical’. When their substance is air, they are spirits and souls, and when their substance is water, they are bodies”:** For the distinction between these two groups of the Arabic alphabet, see commentary to [15] below.

**“...So also for the Creator, exalted be He, the body of the world with all its parts is like a book: it indicates what He says, while His speech indicates**

**what is in His hiddenness.”**: For the image of creation as a book, see also above, commentary to [5].

**“We cannot clarify this immense secret any further, for doing so may bring about undeniable corruption”**: The secret which our author mentions, alludes, no doubt, to the esoteric character of the correspondences drawn between human linguistics and divine creative speech. Note that a similar emphasis on secrecy in this very context is made also by the Ikhwān; see, for example, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 3, p. 382; see also Ibn Masarra *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 142; also *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, pp. 170ff. On this secretive attitude, see also Ebstein, “Secrecy in Ismāʿīlī Tradition”.

[13] **“The noblest ones of all the letters are the following nine: *a-l-q-ḥ-n-m-ṭ-r-ṣ*. From their light the [rest of the] letters became invested with beauty and splendor. The following external bodies indicate these nine letters and their nobility: the seven heavens, the Footstool and the Throne; these are the nine bodily entities. They are the letters which God named in the Qurʾān saying: *a-l-m, a-l-m-ṣ, a-l-r, q, n, ḥ-m*”**: Except for a brief mention of *k-h-y-ʿ-ṣ* in [3] above, this is the first time in our epistle where the author deals directly with the topic of the *fawātiḥ*, the fourteen mysterious letters at the beginning of twenty-nine sūras – on the *fawātiḥ*, see *Enc. of the Qurʾān*, “Mysterious Letters”, vol. 3, p. 471 (K. Massey); also *El<sup>2</sup>*, “al-Ḳurʾān”, vol. 5, pp. 412-414 (A. Welch). The letters of the *fawātiḥ*, either as acronyms or otherwise, are perceived as referring to the cosmological entities from which the world is created. Our author here sets apart nine of these fourteen letters, endowing them with a special rank; the rest of the letters, according to him, derive their “beauty and splendor” from these nine. It is noteworthy that “external” cosmological entities – namely, the Throne, the Footstool and the seven heavens – are the indicators of these nine letters and not the other way around. This goes along with such a mystical philosophy according to which letters are the foundation of all created beings. A similar version of this passage appears in al-Būnī, *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā*, p. 68. Al-Būnī’s version contains certain discrepancies compared with our text. These might be due to scribal errors – see note 58 in our translation. Note that in his version, al-Būnī attributes this passage to Sahl al-Tustarī – see also commentary to [17] below.

**“*a-l-m, a-l-m-ṣ, a-l-r, q, n, ḥ-m*”**: for these clusters in the Qurʾān, see sūras 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32 (*alm*); 7 (*almṣ*); 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 (*alr*); 50 (*q*); 68 (*n*); 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46 (*ḥm*).

**“They are the letters of the Pen, the Tablet, the *kun* and the *ṣ*. *A-l-m-ṣ* brings them together. Following them in rank and nobility are the letters of the [primordial] dust, the air, the atmosphere (*jaww*), the wind, the cloud,**

**darkness, light, fire, water, clay, heaven and earth”**: The author seems to move away from the discussion of the nine superior letters to discuss the fourteen *fawātiḥ* as a whole. However, the list of cosmological entities which our author brings to bear does not add up straightforwardly to fourteen (cf. Garrido, “El tratado de las letras”, p. 100, note 55). Moreover, it is not clear how these entities precisely relate to the letters; whether they are acronyms or not. A more elaborate discussion of the fourteen letters and their corresponding cosmological entities appears in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 155. According to Ibn Masarra, these fourteen letters correspond to the fourteen “foundations of [all] things” (*uṣūl al-ashyāʾ*). These are the Pen, the Tablet, the *kun* and the *ṣ*; below them are air, the primordial dust (which Ibn Masarra may identify with the primordial cloud, ‘*amā*’ – see Introduction, note 23), wind, atmosphere, water, fire, light, darkness, and clay. In contradistinction with our author, Ibn Masarra specifies the manner in which these cosmological entities relate to the letters; for example: *qāf* and *mīm* relate to *qalam*, the cosmological Pen. Finally, it should be noted that Ibn Masarra opens his discussion of the fourteen letters and their fourteen corresponding entities with a citation of Sahl al-Tustarī regarding the creative *kun*: “Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī said that all created beings were created by means of *Kāf* and *Nūn* [= *kun*]”. It is not clear whether what follows, i.e., the aforementioned discussion, is also attributed by Ibn Masarra to Sahl or not. Significantly, in the passage from al-Būnī referred to above, where Sahl is also cited, only the nine superior letters are discussed, whereas in Ibn Masarra’s passage there is no mention of the nine superior letters. What we may have here are two different apocryphal traditions attributed to Sahl concerning the *fawātiḥ*, one relating to the nine superior letters and one relating to the fourteen *fawātiḥ*.

A similar list of cosmological entities, emanating from creative divine letters, appears in Ismāʿīlī mythology – see Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman, *al-ʿĀlim wal-ghulām*, pp. 14-15: air, water, darkness, the light of heavens and earth, vapour (*dukhān*), mud (*ḥamaʾ*) and fire.

**“A-l-m-ṣ brings them together”**: A similar idea is conveyed also in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, where this cluster of letters stands for four ranks in the hierarchy of being: the divine essence (*dhāt*), Godship (*ulūhiyya*), Kingship (*mulk*) and Handiwork (*ṣanʿa*). The last three, according to Ibn Masarra, correspond to the neoplatonic scheme of the universal intellect, universal soul and nature – see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 146-152 and especially f. 149. As noted before, neoplatonic concepts are absent from our epistle.

**Section on the *Qurʾān***: On the face of it, this title, which is found in the MS itself, suggests the introduction of a new topic. However, we see the following two paragraphs as thematically and conceptually connected to the main bulk of the epistle.

**[14] “The Qurʾān is the attribute, the knowledge, the remembrance, the light, the spirit; it separates between the light and the supreme spirit...”**: After discussing the correspondences of letters and the hierarchy of being, the author moves to a discussion concerning the Qurʾān as an all-inclusive cosmological entity. This perception of a transcendent Qurʾān, which stands between the divine essence and creation, is conveyed by a series of concepts identified with the Qurʾān: the attribute (*al-ṣifa*), the knowledge (*al-ʿilm*), the remembrance (*al-dhikr*), the light (*al-nūr*) or the great light (*al-nūr al-aʿẓam*), the spirit (*al-rūḥ*), and the superabundance (*al-mazīd*). The cosmological Qurʾān is also identified with the supreme name of God, namely, the hundredth name which contains (*al-jāmiʿ*) and stands above the canonical ninety nine divine names. As the all-inclusive name, this supreme name, without doubt, is the name *allāh* (see commentary to [6] above). Note that in [7] above, the name *allāh*, in its capacity as the second cosmogonic rank below the divine unknowable essence (*huwa*), is also identified with a similar series of concepts: the great light, the superabundance, the knowledge and the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*). This series of equated concepts, relating to the second cosmogonic rank below the divine essence, our author shares with Ibn Masarra; in *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 164-165, Ibn Masarra states that above the remembrance (*dhikr*), which he identifies with the universal intellect, stands the supreme remembrance (*al-dhikr al-aʿlā*), which he also calls, inter alia, the great light (*al-nūr al-aʿẓam*) and the supreme spirit (*al-rūḥ al-aʿlā*). Note, however, that our author does not employ any of the neoplatonic terms.

**“It is a species (*nawʿ*), and the ninety nine names are its individuals (*ashkhāṣ*)”**: Here, in an attempt to portray the relationship between the cosmological Qurʾān and the divine names, the author employs philosophical terminology, originating in Aristotelian logic. As the author seems to identify the Qurʾān with the name *allāh* (see above), he defines it as a ‘species’ and the ninety nine names he defines as its “individuals”. For the terms *nawʿ* and *ashkhāṣ*, see, for example McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, pp. 55-57 (al-Fārābī); Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, pp. 47-48.

**“The Qurʾān goes back to them, I mean, to the ninety nine [names]. They are the sum total (*jumal*) of its knowledge and the steps to paradise.... All of them go back to fourteen combinations (*jumla*)...”**: Note that here the term Qurʾān refers, no doubt, to the text of the revealed scripture and not to the cosmological Qurʾān. According to our author, the cosmological Qurʾān contains in it all the ninety-nine names; the ninety-nine names, in their turn, contain in an undifferentiated manner the entire knowledge of the revealed scripture; finally, these ninety-nine names are contained within the fourteen letters of the *fawātiḥ*. In other words: the way to attain the knowledge encoded in the revealed scripture begins with deciphering the *fawātiḥ*, continues with the true understanding of the ninety-nine names, and culminates in reaching the transcendent Qurʾān.

**“They are ... the steps to paradise”:** This statement is based on a well-known canonical *ḥadīth*: “God has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one; he who counts them will enter paradise” – see, for example, al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-tawḥīd, bāb 12 (no. 7329), vol. 4, p. 392; idem, Kitāb al-shurūṭ, bāb 18 (no. 2736), vol. 2, p. 185. On this *ḥadīth*, see Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, pp. 51-68. The notion of ascending the steps to paradise by means of the divine names is central to the thought of Ibn Masarra and is elaborated in detail at the beginning of his epistle on letters, see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 131-132. Similarly to our author, Ibn Masarra too, perceives the divine names as permeating the revealed scripture and in particular, for him, too, they are encoded in the *fawātiḥ*. Hence, it is the deciphering of the *fawātiḥ* and the divine names inherent in them that leads to paradise. Note, however, that unlike Ibn Masarra, our author refers to this idea only fleetingly.

**“The [step] that completes [the ninety nine] to a hundred is the step of proximity (*wasīla*). It is the great light, the superabundance which, in human existence, has no limit”:** The term *wasīla* denotes ‘means of access’; in a religious context as, for example, in Q. 5:35, 17: 57, it denotes the means by which one attains proximity to God. In the current context, the term has a distinct meaning: it signifies the final and ultimate rank in respect of the human ability to attain nearness to God. Such an understanding of this term is shared also by Ibn al-‘Arabī as, for example, in his answer to al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s ninety-third question: see *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 73, vol. 3, p. and ibid, p. 172. For ‘superabundance’ (*mazīd*), see above, commentary to [7].

Note that according to Ibn Masarra, the greatest divine name which includes all other divine names (*al-ism al-a‘ẓam al-jāmi‘*) is perceived as “the end of knowledge and the utmost limit of aspiration” (*nihāyat al-ma‘rifa wa-ab‘ad al-ghāya fī al-bughya*) – see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, f. 132. For Ibn Masarra, this name is the name ‘*allāh*’ which, as we have seen above (commentary to [6]), he seems to identify with the universal intellect. In neoplatonic thought, the universal intellect is considered the highest degree to which the human being may aspire – see, especially, Ikhwān, *al-Jāmi‘a*, vol. 1, p. 537, where the universal intellect is defined as *nihāyat al-nihāyāt wa-ghāyat al-ghāyāt*. As above, here, too, our author seems to avoid any clear reference to a neoplatonic scheme.

**“These are the letters by which God has taken an oath”:** This notion appears already in early Qur’ānic commentaries; see, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 130 (commentary to sūra 2:1).

**[15] “As there are fourteen external lunar mansions and fourteen internal ones, so also as regards letters: there are hidden ones, the [obscure letters] of the Qur’ān, and there are external ones; these are the rest of the letters”:**

A similar distinction between the two kinds of fourteen letters as well as their correspondence with the mansions of the moon appears also in Ibn Masarra, see *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 135-136. Ibn Masarra distinguishes there between the fourteen letters of the *fawātiḥ* and the rest of the Arabic letters. The letters that belong to the former group he calls “inner” (*bāṭina*) and sees in them the foundation of all things (*aṣl li-jamī‘ al-ashyā’*); the letters that belong to the latter group he calls “external” (*ẓāhira*). Next in our comparative list come the Ikhwān: similarly to our author and to Ibn Masarra, they, too, distinguish between the fourteen letters of the *fawātiḥ* and the rest of the Arabic letters and they, too, draw this distinction in correspondence with the mansions of the moon – see, *Rasā’il*, vol. 3, pp. 380-382; see also *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, pp. 170ff. Note that our epistle lacks the detailed astrological context of the relevant passages in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. For this analogy of letters to the mansions of the moon, see also Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 2, vol. 1, pp. 216-217 and ch. 198, vol. 4, p. 124.

**“In as much as there are fourteen lunar mansions with regard to the [moon’s gradual] reception of light until it becomes complete to the extent that it resembles the sun, so also the soul; it becomes [gradually] complete and enlightened to the extent that it becomes an intellect. The soul achieves this only by means of her knowledge of the fourteen combinations to which these letters allude”:** The analogy of the moon and the sun to the soul and the intellect, in the context of discussing the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic language, appears also in Ibn Masarra’s *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 142-143, as well as in the Ikhwān, see *Rasā’il*, vol. 4, pp. 232-233. Note that the transformation of the soul into an intellect echoes neoplatonic ideas, although on the whole the author of our epistle seems to steer away from clear neoplatonic schemes. Finally, note that in all three sources referred to here, the correlation of linguistic and cosmological phenomena is offered as both the object and the outcome of ‘contemplation’ (*i’tibār*, *ibra*).

**“All of these are contained within these three letters: *a-l-m*”:** For the importance of the cluster of *a-l-m* as portraying the three levels of being, cf. Ibn Masarra, *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ff. 143-145; see also above commentary to [6].

[16] These clusters accurately represent the occurrence of the mysterious letters at the beginning of twenty-nine sūras. For the list of these twenty-nine sūras, see *Enc. of the Qur’ān*, “Mysterious Letters”, vol. 3, p. 471 (K. Massey); see also above, commentary to [13].

[17] Here the text proceeds to illustrate the practical efficacy of invoking divine names. It does so by means of a story about the early mystic Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. 161/777) and the special properties of the divine name contained in *yā’ sīn*, that is, the sūra that begins with this cluster and is thus named. This story is

presented as related by Sahl al-Tustarī. The change of style and contents in relation to the rest of the epistle is notable: not only is a narrative style introduced into the epistle – which, thus far, consisted of cosmogonic and cosmological elaborations; there is also a transition from a theosophical discussion of letters and divine names as the building blocks of creation to the practical, even magical, properties of one specific sūra – *yā' sīn*. These changes suggest that the section at hand may have been added as an appendix to the epistle, linked simply by the ascription to Sahl al-Tustarī. On the question of authorship, see Introduction. As for the contents of the narrative: in most Ṣūfī hagiographies relating to Ibrāhīm b. Adham, a recurring motif is his meeting with a mysterious figure in the desert. The latter teaches Ibrāhīm God's greatest name (*ism allāh al-a'ẓam*); when invoking God by this name, he is told, one is answered and one's wishes become fulfilled – see, for example, al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, pp. 35-42 and especially pp. 37, 39-40. However, to the best of our knowledge, the story as narrated in our text is not found in the classical Ṣūfī literature. A brief version of it, also with an attribution to Sahl al-Tustarī, is found in the magically-oriented *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā* by al-Būnī – see *ibid*, p. 68. The magical properties of God's names are boldly pronounced in the appendix of our epistle, especially in the statement “he who learns it and invokes God by it will be answered, be he pious or libertine.” Compared to this, al-Sulamī's version concerning the power in invoking God by His ‘greatest name’ is rather attenuated. Indeed, the emphasis on magic rather than spiritual piety in this story makes its attribution to Sahl spurious.

**“If he invokes [God] by it concerning the thing to which this [name] is specific (*khawāṣṣ*)...”** The idea that divine names and letters have specific properties (*khawāṣṣ*) essential for the magical practice – this idea is typical of medieval Arabic magic. See, for example, al-Būnī's *Shams al-ma'ārif*. In Arabic alchemy, too, the concept of “specific properties” is prevalent and central, see Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 1942, pp. 61-95; Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, Index, s.v. *khawāṣṣ*. It is noteworthy that Ibn Masarra's *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* is titled *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, although the magical and practical aspects of letters or divine names are absent from it. On the fine distinction between discussing the power of names and letters and advocating the practical use of these powers, see Ibn al-'Arabī, *Kitāb al-mīm*, pp. 7-8 and Gril, “The Science of Letters”, pp. 123-124; see also Svirī, “*Kun – The Existence-Bestowing Word in Islamic Mysticism*.” For typological distinctions in this respect, see also Introduction.

**“Consider this: suppose you went to a pharmacist's shop with an illness...”**: In this parable, the author's intention is to illustrate that a fruitful magical process is based on the accurate correlation between the specific properties of the divine name used and the objective of this process. Hence, in using the properties that inhere within sūra *yā' sīn*, one has to know accurately which of the divine names



contained in it has the correct properties for achieving the object of his request. The parable of the pharmacist's shop in a magical-therapeutic context, appears also in a well-known Jewish medieval treatise, *al-Kitāb al-khazarī*, written in Judaeo-Arabic by Judah Ha-Levi, the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish Andalusian author – see Judah Ha-Levi, *Kitāb al-radd wal-dalīl* (= *al-kitāb al-khazarī*), pp. 20-21, 31 (translated into English by H. Hirschfeld: *The Book of Kuzari*, pp. 50, 61). As has been shown by the late Prof. Shlomo Pines, Judah Halevi's work exhibits a profound dependence upon Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī conceptions – see Pines, “On the term *Ruḥaniyyot*”, especially pp. 525ff; idem, “Shīʿite Terms and Conceptions”. The appearance of this parable in a Jewish-Andalusian work, influenced by the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī tradition, strengthens our hypothesis according to which our epistle, from a typological perspective, does not belong to the Ṣūfī Tustarī tradition. More on this, see Introduction.

Note that ch. 20 of *Shams al-maʿārif*, which is dedicated to *yāʾ sīn*, contains many invocations (*daʿawāt*) based on the sūra's verses, thus suggesting that the whole *sūra* with all its verses, and not just one special name clandestinely contained in it, may be invoked in order to affect and alter adverse situations – see *ibid*, pp. 259ff.

[18] “The Messenger of God, may God's prayers and blessings be upon him, said: ‘Everything has a heart; the heart of the Qurʾān is *yāʾ sīn*’”: For this *ḥadīth*, see al-Ṣanʿānī, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, vol. 3, p. 372; al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 5, pp. 162-163 (no. 2887); Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 11, pp. 342-344; see also al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, ch. 253, pp. 335-336.

“In respect of the human body, the heart is like the sun in respect of the world”: For an analogy of sun and heart, see Ikhwān, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 2, pp. 145, 477; vol. 4, pp. 214-215; *al-Jāmiʿa*, vol. 1, pp. 519-520, vol. 2, pp. 111-120, 254-259. The correspondence of *yāʾ sīn* to the human heart and, *ipso facto*, to the sun was taken up also by Ibn al-ʿArabī, as can be seen in *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 90, vol. 3, p. 310. For the sun as the heart of the cosmos, see also *ibid*, p. 305; see also ch. 360, vol. 5, p. 531. Note that the references to the sun are associated, no doubt, with the references to the moon in [15] above. These references retain echoes of astrological conceptions current in medieval Neoplatonism, as can be seen, for example, in the Ikhwān's *Rasāʾil* as well as in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and in medieval Jewish sources from al-Andalus; for Abraham Ibn Ezra, for example, see Sela, *Abraham ibn Ezra*; also Schwartz, *Studies on Astral Magic*.

“...for in the sun lies the perfection of life, vegetation, propagation (*wal-nushūr*) and movement. When its light spreads (*intashara*) upon the earth, everything on it comes to life and moves; but when its light fades, the horizon darkens and every living thing becomes still and falls asleep”: For the vitality



that comes from the sun and the immobility that follows its absence and their eschatological significance, see next paragraph. Note the eschatological connotation of the verbal root *n-sh-r*: in addition to “propagation”, *nushūr* also means “resurrection”.

**[19] “These two powers of [the sun] resemble the two trumpet blows that Isrāfīl will blow [at the Resurrection]”:** For the two trumpet-blows see Q. 39:68; on assigning these blows to the angel Isrāfīl, see commentaries to this verse; for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 12, p. 37; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 12, pp. 151-152; see also *Enc. of the Qurʾān*, s. v. “Apocalypse”, vol. 1, p. 111 (F. Leemhuis). According to some commentaries, the first blow will herald the imminent death of all the inhabitants of the world, while the second blow, which will occur later, will herald the resurrection. This eschatological tradition complements the analogy with the sun, whose absence signifies darkness, sleep and death, while its shining light signifies life and vitality. Note that in vol. 2, p. 145 of *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*, where the sun is discussed in analogy with the heart, the Ikhwān identify the spiritual powers (*rūḥāniyyāt*) descending from the sun to the sublunar world with the angels; they mention one angel in particular – Isrāfīl, the possessor of the trumpet (*ṣāḥib al-ṣūr*).

It is noteworthy that in Sahl’s *Tafsīr*, an “inner” commentary of the above mentioned verse is offered in which the theme of correspondences between sun and heart is absent and in which there is no reference to any mythical-eschatological aspects – see *Tafsīr al-qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, p. 82. The commentary that Sahl offers in his *Tafsīr* is purely psychological and mystical, in accordance with classical Ṣūfī concepts and teachings and in contradistinction to the commentary offered in our epistle.

**“Yāʾ sīn contains the name which is in the sun”:** This statement relates, no doubt, to the above mentioned *ḥadīth* (see [18]). However, it remains unclear what the name “which is in the sun” actually is. In any case, in Sahl’s *Tafsīr* to sūra *yāʾ sīn* (p. 78), there is nothing which is remotely similar, in contents or style, to this appendix attributed to him.

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#### ABSTRACT

Our paper reconsiders the ascription of an unnamed epistle on letters to Sahl al-Tustarī, a distinguished Ṣūfī master from Baṣra (283/896). This short epistle is part of a unicum manuscript: Chester Beatty no. 3168, a codex comprising of various manuals and treatises on letters, divine names, invocations, esoteric practices and similar topics. It was found by M. K. I. Ja'far, who, although this epistle appears in the manuscript with no title and no explicit author, attributed it to Sahl al-Tustarī and named it *Risālat al-ḥurūf* (*Epistle on Letters*). Under



this title and authorship the text was published twice: first by Ja'far and later by Pillar Garrido. The paper consists of an introduction, translation and a detailed commentary of the epistle. In addition to reviewing the question of authorship, our paper wishes to examine the mystical philosophy which this epistle, as well as other sources, exhibit; in particular the mystical-philosophical vision of letters as the building blocks of creation in a hierarchical cosmological and cosmogonic process.

Working from a comparative and historical approach, we came to the conclusion that this epistle could not have been composed by Sahl al-Tustarī. Although we could not offer an identification of authorship, we could place the epistle within an intellectual milieu in which 'letter mysticism' occupied an important position, especially from an occult-theosophical approach. We could find parallels of such an approach in Shī'ī-Ismā'īlī literature as well as in the works of Andalusian mystics, in particular the tenth-century Ibn Masarra in his *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* (*Book on the Properties of Letters* – also included in the same codex), and the twelfth-thirteenth-century Ibn al-'Arabī.

**Keywords:** Abū Sa'īd Ibn al-A'rābī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Andalus, al-Būnī, cosmogony, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, divine names, esotericism, *fawātiḥ*, *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, *ḥurūf*, Ibn al-'Arabī, Ibn Masarra, Ibn Sālīm, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Islamic mysticism, Ismā'īlism, Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, letter mysticism, mystical philosophy, Neoplatonism, *Picatrix*, Sahl al-Tustarī, Sālimiyya, *Shams al-Ma'ārif al-Kubrā*, Shī'ism, Ṣūfism.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article met en question l'attribution d'une épître sur les lettres de l'alphabet à Sahl al-Tustarī, un maître soufi de grande renommée, originaire de Baṣra (m. 283/896). Il examine aussi la philosophie mystique qu'exposent cette épître et d'autres sources, notamment la vision mystico-philosophique des lettres de l'alphabet comme étant des unités de base dans la création selon un processus hiérarchique, cosmologique et cosmogonique.

L'article comprend une introduction, une traduction et un commentaire détaillé de ce traité, qui est inclus dans un manuscrit unique découvert par M. K. I. Ja'far dans le codex Chester Beatty de Dublin (no. 3168, ff. 166-174). Ja'far a attribué ce traité à Sahl al-Tustarī et lui a donné le titre *Risālat al-ḥurūf* (*Épître sur les lettres* [de l'alphabet]). Cette épître a été publiée deux fois sous ce titre et ce nom d'auteur, d'abord par Ja'far, puis par Pillar Garrido, bien qu'elle apparaisse sans titre ni nom d'auteur dans le manuscrit.

En s'appuyant sur une approche comparative et historique, il a été possible de prouver que cette épître n'a pu être composée par Sahl al-Tustarī. Bien que l'on n'ait pu aboutir à l'identification de son auteur, cette épître se situe bien dans un milieu intellectuel où le mysticisme des lettres occupait une place importante, tout particulièrement d'un point de vue occultiste et théosophique. La littérature

shî'ite-ismaélienne offre d'importants parallèles quant à ce point de vue. On en trouve aussi dans les œuvres des mystiques andalous, en particulier chez Ibn Masarra (10<sup>e</sup> siècle), dans son *Kitāb khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf* (*Livre sur les propriétés des lettres*), lequel est d'ailleurs inclus dans le même codex. D'autres parallèles encore apparaissent chez Ibn al-ʿArabī, le grand mystique du treizième siècle.

*Mots-clés*: Abū Saʿīd Ibn al-Aʿrābī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Andalus, al-Būnī, cosmogonie, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, noms divins, ésotérisme, *fawātiḥ*, *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, *ḥurūf*, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Ibn Masarra, Ibn Sālim, Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, mysticisme islamique, Ismāʿīlisme, Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, mystique des lettres, philosophie mystique, néoplatonisme, *Picatrix*, Sahl al-Tustarī, Sālamiyya, *Shams al-Maʿārif al-Kubrā*, shî'isme, soufisme.